The Demon Girl

THE DEMON GIRL

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Chapter One

The day I learnt I was a demon was the worst day of my life. I won't lie. I spent most the day terrified of dying, or losing a limb.

The first thing I heard, and thought about when I woke that morning was of demons. A were-cat scream echoed for a beat, before an answering scream, higher in pitch called in the distance. It sounded like the packs were fighting; a territorial dispute most likely. There was a Pride not too far from the Temple. A muffled shriek drifted up through the floorboards, and I rolled my eyes when it happened on the next scream. I buried my head under the pillow, pulling my blanket up. New Disciple's thought the world was ending every time a demon passed nearby. It took them long to understand, if the Wall was breached the klaxon went off to warn us.

I rolled out of bed, tripped over the mountains of fabric and crushed cans that littered the floor of my room, and head butted the wardrobe door. It bounced back. Clothes flung over the top and spilling out the bottom had stopped it from clicking shut. I was not a dirty person, but a messy one. I was the kind of person who could make mess in an empty four by ten box. Stood in my fraying bra and panties, I groggily scratched at my knee, trying to pull myself together. It took a lot of rummaging around before I pulled on my ragged jeans and faded tee shirt, some pre Rupture band on the front. Not the best gear for running, but I was going to have to go straight to class afterwards. I put my boots on and headed outside.

It was dark. Dawn was hours away, and the grounds were eerily quiet. Fire drums set alongside the pathway flickered, and weak flames cast a sick flush over the cold ground. Electricity was hard to generate, so the Sect cut corners where it could. Resources during the day, and after dark, focused on Wall hotspots, places difficult for the Clerics to easily defend, like steep ravines and cliff faces. These were the places demons too often breached. My eyes skipped over the Temple grounds, and every graffiti wall, battered trashcan was colored fondly in my mind's eye. The Temple was an army base, before the Rupture, but now it was the stomping ground of the Sect Clerics and their Disciples. It was home. Safety. My eyes settled on the Wall in the near distance, peeking out from the forest bordering the region. Past that electric fence was Outside. Past that fence roamed the demons.

I started at a jog. In no time I was at the main gate whistling to the

security guard who barely looked up from his book. I wondered where he'd gotten that. Books made purely for entertainment were as rare as plain paper. The Sect had a library of course, right here at Temple, but you had to have serious pull with the Priests to be able to rent one. We lucky Disciples got to feel the smooth pages of a book on a regular basis, even if they were educational, and my envy was brief. The guard caught me eyeing up the pages and placed it on his lap. He waved me on as the gate cracked to let me out.

Leaving Temple, I was soon on a wide and flat lane gravitating toward the forest. I reached the Wall and stared at it. Each time I came here I asked myself the same question; was defying Sect Doctrine and stepping past this point worth it? The excited thump of my heart told me the answer. I glanced behind to scan the roadside and check I was not in sight. Confident I was alone; I slid through the sliver of space between the charged wires then held my breath for a beat. There was nothing but silence. I had no idea how I'd done it, but one morning I was tired of plodding the same ground, and I'd looked out into the forest with its thick tree trunks, jutting roots, and seen a thrilling new route to push myself harder and faster. I had stood, and stared at the webbing of steel then wished for a hole to climb through. The wires had just unraveled without setting off the klaxon. I remembered thinking with a horrible kind of panic that I had somehow done witchcraft, and was convinced I was the blackest kind of evil. Then I realized how ridiculous I was being, and figured it was a coincidental gift from the universe, or something. Now every morning I had a new obstacle course to enjoy.

The trees were tall, and the air was fresh and clean and free. I ran, racing the beat of my own footfalls. Cold wind whipped past pushing hair into my face. Gods, how I loved to run and revel in the illusion of freedom it gave. I was the fastest Disciple at the Temple, and the best at cross-country; it took a lot to tire me out. I ran until the forest became too dense for me to sprint without tripping over roots. My chest rising and falling was a pleasant feeling I rarely got to experience, and only could experience when I ran Outside. Pushing at the long and dark tangle of my hair, I wished there was less of it. I snapped off a knobby twig from a shrub at my heel and pulled it back into a messy bun, using the twig to pin it there. I was distracted, and only because a raven boldly cutting past drew my attention from the task of managing my hair, did I see a movement at the corner of my eye.

A figure strode away from me up a leafy incline, into the light side of the daybreak.

“Hai?” I called my voice low.

The retreating shape paused, only to dart deeper into the gloom. Cresting the slope it winked out of sight. I ran after it. It seemed like the thing to do at the time. Skidding to a stop at the slope summit, I let out a surprised grunt. I could see down and far out into the forest. There was nobody down there, nothing but more trees. Fear whispered in my ear no humans are supposed to be Outside, but I shook it off. Such a thing was surely nothing but my imagination. No demon would be this close to the Temple. It would be like a human who wanted to live a long life doing a jig with their eyes closed on the edge of a cliff.

Then I saw it again. The shadowed figure was there when I turned around, but was at the bottom of the slope. My feet skipped back then there was no more floor.

I remembered the same time my head moved to where my feet had been, that I’d been standing on the apex of a steep and high slope. I went down. I tumbled backward and ended up rolling and rolling. The world churned around me, but leveled out abruptly as I crashed into the base of a tree at the slopes underside.

My arse was up in the air and my shins mashed against my forehead. Oh gods it hurt. I rocked my body until I fell onto my side, and pulled my legs back to curl them under me. I breathed in and out slowly, mentally checking myself over. Nothing felt broken. I sat up and stretched it out. No, nothing was broken. The pendant I wore around my neck pressed into my collarbone awkwardly. I fiddled with it until it hung properly, and the leather cord was no longer choking me.

I stood and rubbed at my head, then tried to get my bearings.

The slope was too steep to climb back up and I wasn’t much into rock climbing. Like most people I was reasonably tolerable of heights, up to a certain point and tolerable with deep water, up to a certain point. And even agreeable with confined spaces. Up to a certain point. Heights especially high were a stickler with me, despite my love of the things you could do when you were especially high. I had a way of pretending the floor was much closer than it truly was. Nevertheless, the slope was too high to pretend, so I was either going left or right. Determined to stay calm, I ignored the first curls of fear in my stomach. I hadn’t explored this far out into the forest yet and based on how long I had run for, I was at least ten miles from the Wall. I was not worried about the time; I could still get back for breakfast and

with enough time to walk to class with Alex. Looking to the east the sky was lightening to blue, but the sunrise was always painfully slow. Classes did not start until the sun was in the sky.

I picked the straightest line through the trees as I could, and started off, my boots slapping muddy puddles riddling the way. In the early morning the forest was empty of human presence apart from its familiar visitor in me, but it was creepy now, like someone was watching.

A short while later it was clear I'd done something wrong. The trees were getting denser, and more closely packed together, like I was going further into the forest. I stopped and spun around. My first instinct was to go back. I was walking in a straight line, and I could go back to the slope base and start again. I had been walking in a straight line, hadn't I? Those nasty curls of fear tickled my insides again. I started to walk back, but stopped after less than half a mile. I scanned the ground. Horrified at what I did not see, I knelt down to get a better look. To my dismay I could not see any footprints or other evidence I had passed this way. All Clerics were master trackers, bested only by shifters who changed into predators like big cats. As a Disciple I had been trained in the basics of tracking, of course, and at that moment I felt the bitter sting of failure. What I should have done the moment I felt lost is literally retraced my steps and started again. But I hadn't done that. I'd let the fear get one up on me, and plunged into the forest without thinking. I needed to calm down and focus. I figured if I went high, I could see further around me.

I strode back a pace, and took a running jump at a broad oak trunk. I reached the lowest branch starting five feet or so above my head, and dug my fingertips into the bark. Tree climbing was easy, and in no time I hauled my body over the highest bough that would hold my weight. I balanced on my toes, hands to knees. Exhaling my breath was visible plumes of wispy vapor, and for a few seconds I chugged circular globules to amuse myself.

It was cold, it being the end of autumn, but the cooler days didn't bother me. It was a welcome change since my body had always run hot.

The clouds on the horizon were dark with rain, darker than the sky now. They rolled low and blocked out the coming light. There was a thick hum in the air, a sure sign a storm was blowing in. My heart did a jig in my chest, and my mood picked up, for I simply loved a good storm. The clean scent of crushed needle leaf on the breeze was

refreshing, and a nice change to the ashy smell that saturated everything at the Temple.

Getting back on track, I looked around in a wide circle. I bit my lip and looked the circle again, slower this time. I was in trouble. I couldn't see the Wall or the end of the forest. I must have run much further than I usually did before I'd fallen. Then I'd walked even further in the wrong direction.

I stood, clasped the branch overhead and skipped to the edge of my perch. Loosening my hold above, I pushed back with my foot and both my arms stretched back. I arced into a crescent and was momentarily suspended in the air. The crown of my head raced to catch my arms as my legs coiled and flew overhead. The world was crazy for a second; up was down, down was up. Pointed feet followed my legs around and then I was falling. Feet a foot apart, my knees bent to absorb impact as I landed, arms extended either side of me for balance.

That bit of fun helped chase away some of my distress. I was good at identifying my emotions and could control them with distractions if I caught them early enough. There were several notable times I'd allowed myself to fall into foul rages, where I'd thrown things about and punched walls, laughing as I did so. The most frequent were bouts of manic happiness where everything was funny. The worst and hardest to control were the dark humors. Sometimes the twisted things my imagination threw at me were only scary, and off-colour to think about once I'd snapped out of it. I'd always been odd, different to the girls around me, and those times where I'd lost control made some people suspicious and afraid of me.

Oh yes, I'd become good at controlling myself.

Back down below the forest canopy it was dark. The sunrays had not broken through the leaves, and the understory had a monochromatic look. Silver bark, grey leaves and black spaces between. I pushed some hair out of my eyes that had gotten loose from my makeshift bun, and breathed in. Smells of the forest, nutty sycamore maples and sweet night flowers releasing the last of their fragrance, were strangely comforting. I was deep into wild and civilization was far behind, but I knew panicking would only make things worse.

A faint rustle ahead made me pause and swiftly reconsider panicking. Another, louder rustle made me tense. A tingle of fear ran down the back of my legs. The forest was full of animals of course, deer, badgers and more birds than I could name, though the most popular was the

raven.

The thought I'd been consciously avoiding until now, making me want to lie where I was then die quietly and run shrieking in the opposite direction, was that I was in demon territory.

A flicker of light illuminated the leaf edges in the darkness. I heard a low murmur of sound, hushed and urgent. Instinctively crouching down, I crawled forward and was scared. Voices. Demons spoke, of course. They were bloodthirsty and evil, but intelligent too. Like a rational individual, I could have gone the other way, but then I would not know what kind of demon was close by. If they were shifters with tracking skills, I was no better than a dead body anyway. Soon, I saw the pale glare of artificial light and inched closer, keeping myself low to the floor. My knees scrapped sharp twigs, hard stones. The prickly leaves of low grown shrubs stroked my cheeks, and forehead, as I pushed forward. My breathing sounded too loud in my ears, and I tried to breathe shallow. I kept my moves small and stealthy, like I was taught in Subterfuge when learning how to track demons for the element of surprise.

Ahead of me, there was a small clearing and three bodies in it.

Two were human, Clerics, identified by the peculiar hooded crimson blazers they wore with black tails that flowed to their knees. The wide, pointed hood could cover your face to the nose, and the well-known white-eye sigil stitched on their breast pockets, commanded fear from demons and submission from Disciples. The one facing me was female with her hood down. She was skeletal with mud colored hair and pinched lips, but would be attractive if you like women with up-tilted eyes and a mean-looking disposition. The other had his back to me and was a well-built male. Small but compact with big arms and calves.

To my horror the feeling that surged through me was not relief. These Clerics would take me back to the compound, and I would get into heaps of trouble having to somehow explain the hole in the Wall. But that versus being caught by a demon and killed was preferable, right? No. I sat in my hiding place and quaked in my boots. My stomach twisted into a double knot and my teeth chattered, because something bad was happening.

The third body in the clearing was a demon. A kind I had never seen before in my life, meaning she could only be one thing. Green skin damp and scarlet hair wild, the fairy was sprawled across the forest

floor in a tangle of her own gawky limbs. It was clear to me she was terrified. Her vibrant skin looked sallow and her eyes blood shot. A tazer probe buzzed in her shoulder blade, another on her upper thigh. She was crying, a pitiful high keen that was so frail I could barely hear it.

The Lady Cleric twisted the probe deeper into the fairy's leg. "Why do you spy on the Academy?" she asked with chilling calm.

The fairy-girl cringed back. "I mean you no harm."

"And here I thought a fairy could tell no lie."

"I can't." The high chime of her voice shook on each word. "I speak the truth. Let me go, you don't understand what will happen. My brothers-"

The Lord Cleric punched her. Her head flew back and a spray of blood wet the dry mud and spattered over the leaves concealing me. Face wet with tears and whimpering, she tried to crawl toward the trees and dragged up clumps of earth with her fingernails.

"You must let me go." The words sounded muffled, like she had a mouthful of something foul.

The Lord Cleric executed a neat half turn and stamped on her thigh. There was a sharp snap, like I'd picked up a twig and yanked on the ends until the fibers split apart and cracked open. The fairy's leg buckled into an unnatural shape and she screamed. The sound was guttural, a direct translation of pain to sound. I slapped a hand over my mouth to smother my own shriek. Not because of the broken bone, I'd seen and heard tons of those, but because I'd caught the Lord Clerics profile and recognized the handsome face. The Lord Cleric dragged the fairy back into the centre of the clearing and brought a knife to her face. Clamping a gloved hand over her mouth, he slashed the blade across her cheek. Blood seeped from the wound and strangely, the smell of sizzling flesh seeped into the air. I gagged.

It was then my body reacted. It was something natural hidden deep within, you see. I know it now, but didn't know it then, so my actions made no sense to me.

Lurching forward, I snapped twigs beneath me and reached out to her. The Lady Cleric spun and a big, blocky thing appeared in her hands. A gun. I crouched and froze. She peered into the trees for the source of the noise, and I stepped back, snapping another twig underfoot.

The fairy's red irises twitched to me. We locked gazes and recognition made her eyes blaze, her face crease with panic.

She whispered, "Run."

The Lady Cleric's gun swung, jerked, and a gunshot cracked the air. The fairy-girl convulsed then was still, so still.

I was frozen, horrified. I'd seen demons bagged and tagged before when they had dared to breach the Wall and threaten human society, but we were Outside. This was their territory. What could she, a fairy-girl child, have possibly done to deserve torture and execution?

"Show yourself," commanded the Lady Cleric. She stepped forward this time and her eyes roamed the space. She clutched the gun more securely between her hands. "Show yourself, I say. Come out so we can look at you."

When a Cleric asked you a question you answered, and if they bade you to do something, you did it. They upheld Sect Doctrine. The Sect was the single most powerful organization humankind invested their faith and security in. If a Cleric told you to do something, the Sect was telling you to do something. And you did it without question, without thinking. They commanded and you obeyed.

I knew if I did as she asked, I was as dead as the fairy-girl on the floor not ten feet from me. Her word echoed in my ear. Run. It was the only plan I had. I stood from my hiding place, wheeled on the spot, and bolted into the darkness.

The sound of another bullet split the air. Something whipped past my arm and left a hot sting. Feet stumbling, the tears streamed down my face. Thorny branches tore at my clothes and hair. I crashed through the undergrowth, not caring how loud I was or that they would be able to track me I needed to get away. Run, run and hide. I had witnessed something hidden, and knew if they caught me, they would kill me.

A dark shape jumped into my path and brought the butt of a gun hurtling toward my face. One forearm came up to protect my head and jerked violently. Then I cranked back my fist and snapped it forward. The answering grunt told me it was the Lady Cleric. As she staggered the gun swung again, barrel first and forced me to drop and roll. Using the force of my body popping up, I spun, cocked my leg and kicked like mule. My heel connected with her upper back and sent her off-kilter-stance to hell. She flew toward a tree, spindly arms and

legs flailing to hit an oak trunk hard. She collapsed to the floor in a messed up heap.

I'd struck a Cleric. Something crazy people with death wishes did. It was dark and I fretted she saw my face and would recognize me in a crowd. People had always said my hazel eyes were an outlandish shade hard to disregard and off-putting.

Loud footfalls pounded behind me, getting closer. I ran again.

Short violent barks turned my blood to ice. Hounds, they had bloodhounds. I forced strength into moving my feet one in front of the other. Hands fisted, my arms alternated pumping back and forth. The air was solid resistance I needed to punch out of the way as much as the tree branches riddling my path. But I was tired. For the first time I felt my abnormal strength and stamina waning. There was a growl behind me, too close, and a snap of jaws at my heel.

My mind emptied and my heart skipped a thump as unexpected energy trilled through my body like an electric shock. The dark deepened into new dimensions. Shades of electric blue and purple tinted my vision, and I could see everything. Power exploded from my centre, filling my body to the brim. A sound like guck choked out of my throat in ecstasy, I felt so animated. I shot forward like a comet and the forest blurred into flowing lines I distinguished as if standing still. Air glided out my way as I hurtled forward, and my feet glanced effortlessly off the floor, not leaving the slightest imprint in the earth beneath me.

Taken by shock, I planted my feet and slammed to still.

The landscape shifted dramatically, and my sense of direction was completely disoriented. I trembled at the thrumming of air crashing into the collapsing void I'd created behind. Then my eyes started to hurt, opened too wide. The lash of pain on my arm flared painfully then dulled into nothing. I wiped at it. Again and again, crying out and scrubbing at my arm in panic looking for the graze. There was nothing but clammy skin and a dried smear of blood where a cut should be.

It was then the fear took hold of me and I lost control. My chest heaved and I choked a sob. The crazy sound smashing my ears had me seeing double, and my own breath razed across my eardrums. Racked with shivers, I curled into a ball at the base of a tree. My body spasmed once then the convulsions were frequent and uncontrollable.

I kept my teeth clenched to avoid biting my tongue and tucked my arms into my sides. The position, though safe was not comforting. I buried my face in the leaves and scrunched my legs into my chest. I cried out at each lash of pain. My muscles kept up this hedonistic clench and release until they cramped into bunches. Waves of heat shot down my spine, and splinters of ice burrowed into the space between my pores. Each assault was more painful than the last. I shivered as the wind fluttered my sweat soaked my clothes. What hurt most was my head, the pumping of blood in my ears, ringing between my eyes, and the overwhelming scent of my own fear clogging my nose.

Gradually the pain subsided and breathing became easier. My heart took it down a notch and I was grateful, for I was not sure it could take much more. Quivering, my muscles relaxed and stayed relaxed. With a great measure of wonder, I realized there was no longer pain, but an overwhelming sense of all things. Despite my emotional exhaustion my body felt better, and I felt different. Strong.

“Have you calmed down now?” asked an amused voice above me. “I have been told an awakening is easier if you are calm.”

I sprung up to defend myself. My hands were fisted and my face fierce.

At first sight all I made out was a male shape, an impression of someone tall and built. In the lightening dark all I could see were his eyes, wide and cold eyes touched with mad, framed by a tangle of thick lashes. His grey irises were so light they could be silver. They burned, scorched me as his gaze flicked over my face and body. He wore dark, faded jeans and that was that. Feet and chest bare, he was the least civilized boy I’d seen. His skin, pale and covered with intricate tattoos, scintillated even in the absence of light. During my steady appraisal my hands had dropped and relaxed, but they clenched again. Boys slid their eyes up and down you before whistling to catch your attention. They did not stare at you until your insides felt like outsides. The directness of his gaze had me mystified, and I was already under the influence of so many emotions the only way I could react to something I could not understand, was with violence.

However, he remained close and did not look alarmed at my aggressive posture. Belittling the tense atmosphere, his face lit up with a smile.

“Rae,” he murmured and stepped closer.

He lifted his arms as if to embrace me. One more step would close the distance between us completely.

I was scared, so scared. I couldn't speak. There were no words or coherent thoughts in my head. It was a jumble of panic and cautious interest. Who was he? Was he another Cleric? Would he kill me now? Oh gods. I would become one of the faceless and nameless that went missing every year. To be forgotten as my body rotted or was left to become a demon dinner. I couldn't handle it, nor could my body functions manage the full-scale meltdown. My legs buckled and the world went a funny gray colour. I fainted, but told myself I didn't have time to faint, and came to in the next second. Not that my actions meant anything, or my revival is what stopped my ass hitting the ground. The boy darted forward so fast his body blurred, and something hard and invisible shunted into me. So hard it knocked the breath from my lungs. Pushed off centre, my legs flew up and the sky swung into view.

He'd caught me.

"Stop talking," he said. Then smiled.

I stared up at him dumbly. Was he making a joke? I hadn't said a word. In fact I think I'd forgotten to breathe since I saw him, and that's what caused my half fainting spell.

I shifted. My top rode up some and his fingers touched my back. Something hot and powerful invaded me. It charged through my body until every muscle was tense and straining, not pleasant after the baptism of ice and fire I'd been an intimate and unwilling subject of before. And then it was gone, dissipating into nothing. I relaxed so completely it felt like my bones had unhinged, and my muscles liquefied.

The boy's face was blank with shock. Had he felt the painful heat too? I hoped so, because I was sure it was his fault.

There was a fracas nearby, getting closer and louder. My heart did a good job of clambering into my throat and blocking my airway. The party hunting me crashed past and kept on going. The boy, who had crouched down with me on his knee whilst I had worked on breathing right, ducked his head down and tensed. I felt better because he too was barely breathing. My heart thundered and my thoughts raced. The bloodhounds were trained to follow the weakest of trails. Why didn't they smell me when my scent would have led them right to us? This

brought me round to the daunting thought of how I got so far ahead, was able to roll around on the floor, and encounter a strange boy before they had caught up. Again, who was this boy, over whose arm and knee, I was draped? Not that it was uncomfortable, but he'd put his hands on me so easily, and held me close and it feltgood. The shock had me relaxing and looking down at his hands. They were big, hard and somehow elegant as they curled around me.

The hunting party passed out of sight and hearing range. My stomach unclenched, and my heart slid back down to rest uneasily in my chest. The boy remained as he was and peered into my face. My heart raced at how tall and how strong he was. Hair cut close to his head the general impression was hardness. A heavy top brow, and sharp cheekbones rested high on a sculpted face. His nose was the opposite of the distinctive aquiline bridge most boy Disciples had, and I liked it. His bold eyebrows and masculine lips added depth to a face that needed no flattering. The scent of soil and sunlight reached me as I watched his silver eyes flick from my face, to the leather cord at my neck.

"We've been looking for you," he said.

The first words I'd spoken all day were, "Nobody looks for me, and how do you know my name?" Taken aback by the feeble quality of my own voice, I lifted my chin and added some gusto. "I mean, put me down. Now."

He did no such thing and he did not answer my question. But he did smile again, and what a spectacular show it was. His body was heavy and hot. Through the fabric of my clothes I felt the hard lines of him, and the slow thump of his heart over mine. Without thinking, I reached to touch his jaw and it felt like strength. My fingertips glided over a raised slash of skin, and a quick tug tilted his head so I could see more of his profile. I traced a scar following the line of his jaw, curving up to his cheekbone. The skin was puckered, rough. His eyes met mine and I shrugged, the scar made him real to me. I snaked my hands up his bare, solid shoulders and jumped off him so I stood on my own two feet.

I knew without a shadow of doubt this boy would rather die than hurt me.

"Rae," he said softly. I shivered from silky soft calling of my name, but then he finished with, "My name is Breandan, and you are mine."

My whole body jolted. Then my startled laugh broke the short silence. Needing space to think and breathe, I pushed away from him.

“In your dreams,” I said and spun around.

I tried to pin down a direction to run toward. I realized at that moment my solution was downright silly and ineffective. See bad, scary or confusing thing, turn and run from bad, scary or confusing thing until you bump into another bad, scary or confusing thing. I was getting nowhere fast.

“You wouldn’t say such a thing if you knew the truth. And since I saw you first you have to be mine. The white witch was right, and now I’ll never hear the end of it. I didn’t think you would come out here so soon and so freely. I tried to ignore you, even when you got lost, but when I heard you running away from them I had to help. They would have caught you.”

I’d stopped moving in the middle of this rationalization. His voice was awfully attractive. I could never describe how it sounded because it would only ever sound perfect to me, and no one else. Once I’d gotten past hearing the words I thought over the meaning. In delayed reaction my chest puffed out and I bristled.

“The hell I do. People don’t belong to one another, and I certainly do not belong to you, even if you did see me firstwhatever that means. What stupid-”

He moved closer then I could see nothing but his eyes again. Mouth suddenly dry, I was unable to finish my scathing rebuttal, and it took a moment to un-stick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. A warm rolling sensation formed in the pit of my stomach and lodged there. It was an odd sensation, it even hurt a little, but it was a nice pain. I breathed in deeply through my nose and expelled the breath through my mouth. The whole deep breathing thing was helping.

“Okay then, Breandan,” I said serenely but my heart thumped too hard and he coked his head as if he could hear it. I went on nonetheless, “What do you want? Why are you in the forest, alone?” The best defense is a good offence, and I could give as good as I got. “This is demon territory y’know. I can admit I was freaked and a bit off course.” He snorted a laugh and my temper bloated into righteous indignation. “It’s dark out here. I was running away from the Clerics because they had dogs.” My eyes darted to and from his now, uncomfortable with the lie. “And Idon’t like dogs. They bark. Loudly.

And how do you know my name?"

There was a beat of silence as his eyes held mine. "You will have to get out of the habit of lying. You won't be able to do that for much longer. And anyway, you don't have to explain anything to me. I understand. I know you, and that is why we have come for you."

"Are you from the slums?"

For a bad moment there I had assumed he was from the Sect. I would be in a world trouble if anyone saw me out here. I was beyond the Wall, which was forbidden, and I had seen I didn't want to think about the horror I'd seen, and how I'd been foolish enough to get caught seeing the thing I saw. I had disobeyed a direct order from a Cleric, something I, a Disciple training to be a Cleric, should never do. No, I was not so sure anymore. If Breandan was from the Sect he'd have called to the Clerics, not hidden me from them. If he was a civilian, I didn't see how he could come to be lost Outside. After all, you would have to get past the Wall to make it out here. There was not a human alive that didn't understand the dangers of going over the Wall and into demon territory.

I felt stupid then. If there was not a human alive who didn't know how dangerous it was Outside, what the hell was I doing Outside? I was going to have very serious words with myself.

"Coming for you is not something I chose, and believe me, if I could change it I would." He paused and shook his head. "We are stuck. You belong to me," he repeated. "And I to you. Now we have touched it is sealed. Alright?"

Sealed my ass. I decided then and there, I did not like this boy.

"You cannot appear next to me in the middle of demon territory and say such silly things," I said, strained. "You're beginning to scare me."

That was another lie. I was beyond sacred now. My body couldn't keep up a constant pitch of terror, so it had simply gone beyond terror and pressed a big reset button. I was too afraid outside to be anything but calm inside. Voice unattractively shrill, I lowered my clenched fist and took a deep breath. I moderated my voice.

"Let's start with where you're from?"

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his head. "A place not too far from here. You are very lost."

I shifted on the spot. “Are you transferring to this region to be a Disciple?” It happened. Rarely, for it was too hazardous to travel large distances through demon territory, and it was only attempted once a settlement had reached a population density that put all the humans there in danger. But it did happen. He shook his head. “Are you visiting Cleric at the Temple?”

I was reaching, but that could explain how he could be so comfortable in the forest. Clerics were not like regular people and often came from hardy families. The Clerics were the fastest, strongest most intelligent and intuitive of humankind. That is why they managed to keep us so safe.

His face darkened. “No.” The word was fired at me like a bullet.

Without preparing myself for the answer I asked with catty aplomb, “Are you a demon then?”

“Oh yes,” he said softly.

Chapter Two

I waited for the fear and for the panic. I waited for the scream of terror to rip from my throat, but it never came. I waited for him to grab me, and murder me, and cut me into pieces and hide me under the small patch of wild flowers over there. But he said and did nothing. The clever thing would have been to get the hell out of there and start running again. But I didn't want to, and I was curious as to who and what he was. I wanted to know why he was stood in front of me, and what he was after.

His gaze raked over me again and again, looking for something.

"If you didn't think you were safe you would ask me to leave," he said. "And, if you wanted me to leave, I would have done so already."

I hated that his words made sense to me. "Stop trying to be clever, demon-boy."

"I'm trying to help you, demon-girl."

His words had the same impact as a blow to the head. I twitched liked he'd pinched me all over and staggered back.

I knew then something menacing was coming around the corner. I had to accept what he had told me next, right? Not to acknowledge the undeniable truth would be foolish. A tear slid down my face and landed with a soft plunk on my front. I had always been different, strange, but within the realms of human strange. Undoubtedly, I knew I'd gone beyond the boundaries.

He stepped closer, closer still, and our clothes rustled as they touched. Lowering his forehead to touch mine, warm fingers found my hands and coaxed them to entwine with his. I did not like the way my body was reacting to him. It overruled logic and it was beginning to upset me. Something was happening to me and I didn't understand what. Worse, I couldn't explain to myself why I was still there talking to him.

His finger tapped my chin up. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that, but I was never good with words." His voice was serious and complicated. His hand clasping my chin released the knot that had formed in my stomach, and with a sob, I dragged in a breath to control my tears. "Don't do it," he warned and used his hold on my

chin to tug my face closer. “To cry over learning the truth is useless. It should empower you.” He stroked my cheek, wiping the tear there. “You’re sad,” he said brusquely and watched me fight to control myself, “That tells me I have not done this right. Maybe now is not the time to have this talk. I have responsibilities I cannot ignore simply because it will hurt not to be around you. I’ll explain better when I return.”

With no other option I nodded slowly. And then I knocked his hands off me. Whatever was so important he needed to leave me well, that was fine. “You don’t have to justify anything to me,” I said. “I don’t know you and I don’t expect to ever see you again.” He didn’t owe me a thing and I was happy he was leaving.

I could get back to being lost, and worried about being lost.

“So stubborn. I can admit not to see you will be hard. Can you not look outside yourself for a moment to do the same?”

The intention was to tear into him about his stupid, confusing statements that made no sense, but as my head turned his lips brushed along my chin. Gravity shifted and flowed into his eyes to ground me. The world darkened to nothing as they drew me deeper into their shaded depths. My lips parted in a sigh, and my hands swept around his waist as he pulled me closer. His hand tangled into my hair as my own moved over his lower back. I breathed in the heady smell of sunlight from his chest, and the scent became a taste on my tongue. Exploring the dip in his spine, I glided the pads of my fingers into the shallow grove flowing uninterrupted to his shoulder blades. My hands left his back then I hesitated in my exploration. The sensation that slicked over my palms was, odd. Hovering a few inches away from his skin the air felt warmer, thicker.

He jerked back and spun away to look into the forest. He peered around us, and the waves of hostility pulsing from his body cranked the tension in the air up. He stood, all wound up and tense, so I got all wound up and tense, and we fed of each other until I was panting. It was uncomfortably wearing for someone like me who was already beyond terrified.

Breandan said, “Rae, go back to the Temple now. That direction.” He pointed into the trees. When I didn’t move he twisted me around by the shoulder, and pushed me in the direction he’d pointed.

I kind of stumbled a few steps forward before I stopped, and realized I

didn't have to do what he said. "But, you can't tell me I'm a demon then stop explaining."

I wanted to stay, badly, but sense was telling me I had to leave like he said.

"You don't have to argue with every word I say. We'll come for you later. Go now."

Returning his steady gaze with one of my own, I picked up on something I'd been unconsciously registering. There was a barrier between Breandan and I. Pulling my brows together, I tilted my head to watch him, watch me. Not a physical or tangible barrier; invisible. He shimmered and rippled into something different. A soft nimbus coated his entire being. Pearlescent it repelled my gaze.

"Stop hiding from me and I'll go," I said. "You want me to trust you and I can manage some trust since you haven't killed me. But you have to trust me back. You say you're a demon, well then what kind? Show me your true form."

"I don't have the time for this."

"Come on, it can't take that long. Show me then you can run off and do whatever you were doing before you just had to help me."

He made a noise of frustration and pointed again. "Will you at least move in the right direction as we talk?"

I nodded curtly. I was persistent not stupid. If he was this antsy something bad must be coming this way.

"If we run I can get you back and maybe catch it up. Follow me," he said.

And then he was gone. One moment he's walking, and the next he's a silver blur zipping through the trees ahead of me.

It was odd, because I knew it was demon fast, but I could track his movement with my gaze. Was it crazy that I wanted to follow him? Grudgingly, I admitted to myself I'd never wanted to follow someone so badly, and I was never one to shy away from a physical challenge. I'd run blindingly fast from the hounds, and the only difference between now and then was that I was scared. Huh, piece of cake. I had loads of scared stored up around the solar plexus area. Tapping into the well of energy inside me was too easy, and I burst forward.

Everything was so bright and lively, and it was nothing for me to flow across the land at a velocity strange, yet comforting. Breandan took a sharp turn and I was pleased to see I was gaining, gliding across the ground at his side. A chuckle caught my ear. I had made him laugh, and a silly tide of happiness blazed through me. I grinned, and laughed, and sped up to leave him trailing behind. The floor yielded to every pound of my foot. Not a single branch snagged my hair or cut my skin because I didn't let it. I zipped and dodged, jumped and spun a trail in the undergrowth. I didn't know where I was running to, but it felt good to be in motion.

The air was heavy with a piquant scent that fizzed on my tongue. The silhouette of trees taller than any I'd seen rose high in the sky, and a few stars already winked down at me. I'm not a botanist, so all I can say is that there were plants. A big orgy of red, blues and purples scattered everywhere. The breeze was crisp and made everything sway in orderly chaos. The buzzing of insect and restless whining of beast punctured the dawn in harmonic beat.

I knew the moment Breandan's hand reached for mine. My skin tingled and like a magnet seeking its opposite, my hand moved to meet his. A light tug slowed me to a stop. I plucked a leaf from my hair and brushed a lick of dirt off my cheek. I could have continued this grooming session for a while since I felt twigs and thorns caught in my clothes and hair, but I was distracted.

Breandan stood still and let me roam my eyes over him. His profile was sharper somehow, and I pushed the hair out of my eyes to drink the strong column of throat that flowed into solid chest. His ears held my attention for a long while, couldn't say why, before my gaze slid over the straightness of his nose, and the strong planes of his cheek and forehead.

"Let's keep moving," he said. I stood still and he had to either tug me again or let go of my hand. He let go and sighed dramatically. "Stop being difficult. If you're not back at Temple soon, they'll be suspicious of you and it won't be safe there anymore."

He walked off and took no more than five steps before I felt an insistent tug, a niggling urge pushing me toward him. I suspected it had something to do with that painful heat I'd felt when he'd touched me skin to skin for the first time. He had a lot of explaining to do. Gritting my teeth, I started after him and reached out the same moment as he did to clasp hands. We trod a path of crunching leaves and snapping twigs. The breeze was sweetly fragrant and smelled of

green things. It was quiet now apart from the sound of small furry things going about their business in the understory.

“Speak then,” I said. “Don’t go all shy on me.”

“I’m a fairy.”

I blinked and froze. The wind stirred fallen leaves and wrapped his words around me. A few words truly can take your breath away, or make you doubt your own mind. I walked on, not seeing, hearing or feeling.

I managed a sharp noise. “You must think I’m stupid or something. You want me to believe that you are one of the rarest species on the planet?”

He bit back a smile. “You believed I was a demon easily enough.”

“Well, we are in demon territory. You hid from Clerics and only demons do that.”

“You ran from Clerics.”

He had me there. “Uh, we’re not talking about me,” I said hotly. “I’m not the smartest girl, but I’m not stupid either. I’ll be just as impressed if you tell me you’re a shifter or witch.”

“What about me don’t you believe?” he asked after a small pause.

I was on a sarcasm-high now. “Yeah, sure. I believe you. Lucky Rae see’s two fairies, the one kind of demon that is nearly extinct. And she sees them within minutes of each other. Even though the odds of that are-”

“What did the other look like?”

“Uh, green skin and all this long fiery hair.”

He made a clucking noise meant to sound cross, but he smiled radiantly, silver eyes faraway. “I told her to hide her true form.”

The direction of my thoughts became hideously plain, and icy horror froze the blood in my veins.

“I’m guessing you know her?” I tried to keep the question casual but my voice sounded shrill.

“The fairy you saw is called Maeve. She’s my little sister.”

I stared at him, my lips becoming numb. “Sister,” I whispered. “How can you know that? Aren’t all of your females green with red hair?”

“Do all human females have light hair, eyes and skin? No, all fairies are unique, though, there are typical things like our pointed ears and sharp teeth.” He must have figured I was having a simple moment. I didn’t back chat like I usually would. “Don’t worry,” his voice was gentle. “Maeve is a force of good. She’s been looking for you too, and she wouldn’t hurt you. She’s young and stealth is not her gift. She has skills with a blade not even Conall can match.” There was a deep affection in his voice as he spoke of her.

I felt dirty for not saying something sooner and opened my mouth to speak. Those curls of fear sprung up in my belly, and lashed at my insides to silence me. I locked my jaw. No words seemed adequate enough to explain what had happened. Before I had been sad about what had happened to the fairy, even guilty. Who knows what would have happened if I hadn’t spooked the Clerics. They might have let her go. If I told him what happened, how I’d disturbed them and gotten his sister killed, what would he do to me?

Oh gods, I felt queasy. The stress was eating away at me, and I was wound up tight right down to my baby toes.

Then the outline of something big prowled past, ghosting through the trees. I forgot about Breandan, I forgot I’d seen his sister take a bullet to the chest, and forgot I was lost in demon territory as my entire body locked down. Blood rushed in my ears as the shadow trod a path parallel to where we stood. Breandan was calm and unmoved so I toughed it out, and stayed put.

It emerged from behind a tree a few paces away to cross our path. Black and freckled with flaxen rosettes, the big cat’s emerald eyes with slitted black pupils, swept over us. The powerful build and handsome face were too brawny to be anything but male. Slinking to a stop, his ears pricked up and he looked me right in the eye. A wave of consciousness flashed across my skin, and for a beat I couldn’t breathe.

He padded over, thick claws glinting and pressed into my legs. A soft growl rumbled in his throat and his whole body vibrated. I tensed then flexed my hand and let it drift down. As he pushed his wet nose into my palm the growl became a satisfied purr. The cat was warm

and smelt musky. My fingers rubbed up the coarse hair behind his ears then smoothed it down. He nipped at my finger and I yelped. He twitched at the sound, and the long whiskers on his upper lip whistled as they cut through the air. Nudging the back of my knee he made a contented noise, tinged with almost an apology for startling me. His eyes lingered on mine, blinked at me then he sniffed the air and gathered his front and back paws together. Ears flat against his head, he paced forward and slinked lower.

I gasped, spotting a sable colored deer grazing within my line of sight, half hidden by a few dogwood trees. The cat's muscles bunched tightly before he sprung forward and bounded away. I didn't watch what happened to the deer after that.

Breandan watched me, head cocked thoughtfully.

I marveled at the short ebony hairs stuck on my fingertips. Evidence my encounter had been real. I trembled.

"Did that mean something to you?" I asked quietly.

"Oh yes," he replied and took hold of my hand, and started to walk again. "Nothing out here will harm you unless you pick a fight first." He paused. "Usually shifters are not that sociable. Rarely do they interact with those outside their pack, even when they leave Pride territory. Do not make a habit of petting them. Despite your difficult personality, I will protect you until death, but would prefer not to have to deal with such dire circumstances unless necessary." Jerking to a stop he yanked gently on the ends of my hair to pull my head back. "Alright?" His teeth nipped my neck then his lips pressed a kiss to my pulse point. There he stood amongst the trees, smiling down on me and waiting for my answer.

All the while, for all that I'd just experienced and all he'd told me, all I could think was, he kissed my neck.

"Believe it or not I don't skip around looking for trouble. I only come out here for some space to think and run. And I can take care of myself."

After a beat of silence he chuckled and walked on, continuing to tow me along side.

A shifter. I had stroked a were-cat, one of the most feral demons in existence. Only Breandan's firm grip and steady steps forward kept me moving.

“I never realized the different demon kinds lived so close together,” I said.

“Our territories are vast. Right now we are in his back garden. The Pride encompasses the entire human prison. That is why we showed respect and stayed still. If he had taken issue with us here, he would have let me know. But then he has probably scented the vampire too, and is happy to have the extra help in hunting it down.”

“Prison,” I echoed, startled. “Vampire?”

Saying the name made my toes scrunch together in my boots and my stomach pitch dangerously. The dead ones were not demons people dressed up to make scarier than they actually were. Vampires were the creatures you made nicer in stories so that you didn’t pass out when reports one had breached the Wall, and eaten a few homeless people came your way.

“Is that not what it is? A prison the humans have locked themselves inside?”

There was too much behind that simple statement I could not begin to get into.

“So, you can go wherever you like? To hunt vampires, I mean. It doesn’t matter you’re not his kind?” I was fascinated. I had learned more about demonkind in one hour than years of training.

“Why would I not be able to go where I liked? There has not been a war between demonkind and we respect each other enough not impose foolish rules of ownership. Though most of us do avoid venturing into vampire cities. Shifters are bestial under a full moon, but sensible for the most part. The alpha-male keeps them in good order. As for the vampire, he’ll be dealt with soon enough. He’s only on our radar because he’s been round for so long, nearly a month now. It’s unusual for one to stay so long from the safety of a nest. Unusual and worrying considering the timing.”

The Wall stretched out for miles and miles. If the shifters Pride surrounded the entire human region

“How big is fairy territory?”

“Not as big as you may think. We are solitary by nature and usually travel in mated pairs. Small families.”

“There’s nowhere you all get together?”

“I know what you mean. We have two wylds, the Orchard and the Grove.” He paused, slanted a look my way. “You’re asking a lot of questions. You believe me now? That I am fairy, that you are fairy.”

“No,” I blurted. “I’m not I’m not.”

“You never thought it odd you are able to push your body beyond the normal boundaries of a girl your age?”

I ignored the fact he’d called me a girl, and batted his words away with my hand.

“I’m stronger, yes. And I’m fast, but I always have been.” I was stretching the truth. I hadn’t always been fast, but crazy fast.

“And that’s all?”

My pace slowed to a dazed meander, an aimless weave through the mossy trunks. Swallowing hard, I bit my lip and tasted blood. My hand strayed to where the wound from a bullet graze should mark me and felt nothing. I had always been a quick healer. Not that quick, but quicker than most. I was not like other people because I didn’t think or feel the same. I didn’t eat right, or feel right when people touched me. I got urges, strange urges to I blinked away the sting in my eyes. My mind took a frightening and obvious leap of intuition. I stopped. Everything in my world vibrated and slid to a canted angle then jerked straight, becoming new and balancing to the truth. I gave myself time for the largest wave of emotion to subside.

“I am a demon,” I said slowly, testing the words. “I am fairy.”

The world didn’t end. No one gasped or cried out, and there was nothing to suggest anything was wrong anywhere else in the world in that moment. My entire perception and understanding of everything was shifting into a new alignment, but that did not affect anything or anyone but me. My eyes were drawn to Breandan’s face. We stared at each other. Over the worst of my freak out, I had decided to make everything his fault, and I wondered what part of him to hit first.

His expression turned from wary to amused. “See, you’re not surprised. You knew you were different.”

I ducked my head to let my hair fall forward and cover my face. “I wish I’d reacted with hysteria now, like stabbed you with a stick and

run screaming."

Lips curving he shook his head once. "You're taking this well," he explained.

"Better than we'd hoped for." I opened my mouth to ask who this "we" was he kept referring to, but he kept on talking. "The world has changed with demons out in the open and the fact you are training to be-" His expression hardened briefly. "Your reaction is not what I expected, good, but unexpected."

"What did you think I would do?"

He shrugged. "Violence."

The word described how I would have expected to react, but I didn't feel aggressive. I was exhausted, confused and a little giddy. Maybe I was having a vivid dream, or an outer body experience. "Give me longer, I'm working up to it."

"Do you want to talk about it? That helps females."

His eyes fell from mine as the violence he was waiting for seeped through my calm and poisoned my voice. "No." I threw the word at him with the force of an accusation.

"I'm sorry."

I narrowed my eyes. "You need to work on the whole speaking plainly thing."

"The awakening was painful for you." His mouth twisted around the word. "Your nature should not have been released so crudely without you knowing what you truly are. It may seem like I'm being cruel with my words, but we don't have a lot of time and now you have broken the spell you will find it harder to conceal what you are."

It was like he was speaking dead languages to me. One minute, I understood and followed his train of thought, the next I was being dunked head first into the sea when I'd thought I was standing in a field.

"You're not making any sense. You talk like I already know what you're referring to. And I don't."

"Your true form was concealed, a powerful casting. It suppressed and

hid your fairy nature to keep you safe."

I bit my lip. "I really am a fairy too?"

"What else would you be?"

I stopped, and my fingers curled under into fists. "You called me a demon girl. I could be a shifter, or have goblin blood or be a witch." I sniffled. Unattractive, but needed since my nose was running. I was still trying not to cry, and the stinging pressure had to be released somehow.

My voice was muffled and my nose felt thick. "They all look human too."

"Oh, Rae. You look like a human because of your glamour."

My frustration was replaced with confusion and curiosity. "My glamour?" I waited for him to elaborate. He said nothing. I did the only thing I could do and applied logic to try and understand. I felt sick.

"Vampires can do what you describe. Glamour a human when they need to trick and feed."

Was that it? I was I some freaky vampire-fairy hybrid that was going to go mad and massacre a load of people?

"No." His hand cut the air in a strong motion. "What you refer to is purely mind control. The dead ones dress up compulsion to make it seem harmless. Fairy glamour is a small enchantment allowing us to look completely human." He placed a hand to his heart, to his lips and reached as if to touch me. "Magic to our being is air to breathe and water to drink."

The barrier over him rippled again.

"The glamour is that shield over you." My hand swiped feebly but the curiosity in my tone was evident. "The barrier I can't see through or feel." His mouth tugged into a secret smile. Then he looked back over his shoulder, tapped his foot impatiently. I frowned. "You still need to go after the vampire you sensed back there?"

His face smoothed into relief. "Yes, yes I do."

"Then show me. Prove what you are." I stopped and crossed my arms

over my chest. “The quicker you do the quicker you can go.”

Breandan took a long look at me then glowed with an inner light. His face was fiercely beautiful, the perfect features sharpened. His ears had elongated, pointed at the tips and curved into a slender elliptical shape. He looked different. Other.

The desire to hold him had increased in pressure, and was a force attacking all angles.

“Why do I feel like this?” I asked quietly. “I don’t think I even like you. How can I feel like this? Like I’ve known you my whole life. When you touch me I feel complete. When you speak, I accept everything because you said it.”

“The feeling of dislike is mutual, but I’m beginning to think I was born for you.” He sighed. “This will not be easy. Of course I would be the one to see you first.”

He pointed to somewhere behind me and turned his head slowly from left to right, like he was considering something. I looked over my shoulder. We had reached the Wall and the sudden crackling energy in the air allowed me to sense he was doing something big. The red wires stopped humming and cooled to pewter metal instead blazing red with electricity. The wires pinged and unraveled leaving a hole big enough for me to pass through at a stoop.

He jerked his head toward it. “Go now. Be safe and we will come for you.”

Then he was gone. Apparently fairies didn’t do long goodbyes. He was there then he wasn’t.

I was alone again in the forest but at least I wasn’t lost anymore. The sun was nearly done creeping up too. I slipped through the hole in the Wall, and the moment I did it knitted back together, but not before a dark streak dived through.

Every hair on my body stood on end. This was no fairy or Cleric. The movement was too liquid and quick to belong to anything, but a dead one. All I could think was run. I turned, tripped over a tree root and fell flat on my face. A mouth full of dirt, I crawled forward then decided I wanted to see it coming rather than be jumped from behind, and flipped round to scuttle back.

The vampire loomed over me, silent and deadly. He was dressed all in

black and the space around him pulsed with darkness. Gesturing to me, his fingers were palm up and they curled around the air.

“Quiet, now,” he said. “It is not what you think. I would have revealed myself in a less dramatic manner, but the tear the fairy made was closing, and I did not have another way.” His somber expression lightened and his eyes twinkled. “I have already eaten, a skinny girl, bitter.”

I shrieked and scrambled back some more. My hands were scraped and gouged by stones and bracken, but the flares of heat a second after told me I was healing. The vampire followed me, human slow so my eyes could track his movement. I’d heard they liked to torment their meals. Make them beg and scream for death before putting them out of their misery.

“You are being rude,” he said shortly. “Will you not talk to me?”

I blinked, astonished, and stopped moving. “Huh,” I grunted, incredulous. “I’m about to die and you think I’m being rude by not talking to you?”

If I was in my right mind I would never back-chat the living dead, but I was shaking with fear and pretty sure I was about to pee myself.

Back-chat didn’t seem bad anymore.

His face remained passive. “I am death to those who cross my path.” My heartbeat picked up as if to emphasize the point. His mouth pulled into a grim line. “I do not deny what I am. I embrace it, but I have not come here to hurt you. I told you. I have already eaten.”

I started backing up again. It was stupid me crawling back and he walking after me, but now I was over the initial shock, I couldn’t get my body to stop. “Forgive me for not wanting to trust you, but your kind and my kind haven’t exactly seen eye to eye.” As I spoke I wasn’t sure if I meant humankind or fairykind, but I was sure the relationship with the vampires was about on par.

His lips quirked then fell straight. “No. I suppose not. Would it help if I gave you my word?”

He stopped and held out a hand to help me up.

I thought about it and managed to stop crawling. My arms were tired, my ass was damp from being dragged across the forest floor, and I was

pretty sure I had a spider crawling up my back. I sighed and tossed my head to get the hair out of my eyes.

“No, it would not help, but I’m tired of being on the ground, and if you’re going to eat me I’d rather be upright with my head held high.”

I clasped his hand and curled my fingers around his. They were rock solid, cold. He pulled me up and my legs wobbled, so his other hand snagged my waist to steady me. For a moment I stood, but was weightless. The sensation was unusual. I scowled and stared into the face of my vampire. He was older than me, not by much and he was ugly. Swept back from his forehead and longer than fashionable, his hair was coal black, and cut close at the neck. His eyes were red ringed, like he was sickly, and had a peculiar stillness about them. He hadn’t blinked, not once since he’d first revealed himself to me. His eyebrows were thick and dark, as was the smattering of hair on his chin, which had a deep cleft. His brow jutted out from his face and his cheeks were gaunt, giving him a look of the starved. It was a strong face but one that did not appeal to me.

Straightening, I pulled myself from his grip and knocked his hands away. A faint, dry scent hit the back of my throat and my hackles rose. Swallowing hard, my eyes left his as I controlled the sudden urge to launch myself at him. To rip, bite and tear. A manic giggle bubbled in my chest. The thought of launching yourself at a vampire was ridiculous and suicidal, but my body was seriously contemplating it. He brushed the hair out of my eyes and I recoiled. He hadn’t made a move for a vein yet, but he was a blood drinker, and I was full of blood. He flashed me a smile, and his chalky lips framed pearly fangs flanked by two smaller canines. They had run right out as he’d touched me. For a moment I was overcome. I stared at them, the spiky tips resting on his lower lip, a startling shade of ruby red. Everyone knew vampire fangs ran out when they were mad or bloodlusty. Which was he? Probably the latter, if he was mad my limbs would be scattered across the forest floor by now.

“You’re going to kill me now,” I said steadily.

I’d been through too much to deny that I was living on borrowed time. To be honest I was waiting for the hammer to fall. I would die there, food for the vampire-boy the fairy-boy was hunting. Breandan would return eventually, like he promised and find my rotted corpse. Would he be sad? Would he and the ‘we’ he’d referred to, lament over my body. Would they give me a proper burial? After all he had said I was like him, fairykind too. In my last moments of life pondering on how I

felt about being named a demon, I did not feel disgust or fear, but sort of a resigned relief. I was no longer a freaky human girl, but a demon. My strangeness made perfect sense now.

“I am not going to kill you.”

The vampire had spoken. It took me a while to realize he had, because my last words had been a statement not a question. And even if he’d interpreted it as a question, it was clearly rhetorical. I was living my last moments and the flashbacks of my life were about to commence, so the interruption was not appreciated. But since he’d spoken again I felt obliged to say something back, and I was getting used to conversations with strangers.

“Why?” I asked genuinely puzzled. “You didn’t dive through that hole for fun. If the wires had caught you, you’d have set off the klaxon and had Clerics with stakes and silver on your ass until you were ash. Vampires don’t seem the self-sacrificing kind to me. Plus, the sun is rising.” I pointed east. “You don’t have much time, and to be out this early, or late, you must be super hungry to risk the true death. Or suicidal. Which brings me back to the fact you guys are big on the self preservation.”

He made a low rumbling noise and his shoulders shook. It was laughter, and it was gruesome and wretched. “I have been looking for you.”

I thought about this. For a vampire to be looking for you and not hunting you, was unheard of. It was intriguing and I knew then curiosity was about to get me into more trouble.

“You’re not the first to try that line today. You demons know how to flatter a girl.”

He growled a little. “Fairies.” He said the word like a curse.

I sighed again, exaggerating the rise and fall of my shoulders. Fine, my tribulations for the morning were not over. I could deal with that, but I needed the safety of Temple walls. The forest was no longer comforting, but alien and hostile.

“If you’re not going to eat me would you mind if we walked and talked? I’m tired but have to keep going, or I’ll be late for class.”

He remained still and peered past me into the trees. I found it hard to read his face. His expression was not worried, but I thought it

brooding, or rather, preoccupied with being anxious about something.

“I need to find a dark place. A safe place.”

The dead and the sunlight didn’t mix well. They burned, badly, and burst into extravagant blue and red flames. Then their blackened corpses flaked into ash. I could see why he might be anxious to find a ‘dark place’ as he put it.

“My wardrobe is dark.” The words popped out of my mouth before they registered. “Wait,” I said, and held up my palm. The standard cracks in my judgment were now gaping canyons, and there were all kinds of crazy ideas flying around. “You’re friendly, right? If I help you, you aren’t going to turn on me. Or turn me.”

“As you rightly pointed out, the sun is rising and I weaken by the moment. I need to talk to you. Hear what I have to say then I’ll go.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. There did not seem to be too big a downside to this arrangement. “I can do that, hear you out. But tell me, the fairy-boy I met is hunting you.” I watched his face carefully. “Why? Did you do something bad to him or his kind?”

He looked me over so intently I squirmed in my skin. He made a quick movement with his hand that said ‘so what’.

“If they find my resting place they will kill me, and they won’t listen to what I have to say, which is why you must.”

I mouthed my next words silently before I spoke them aloud. “I’m a fairy too.” It was easy to say and I smiled. “It’s important I know if talking to you will get me in trouble.” I paused then grunted. “In more trouble than I already am, I mean.”

His eyebrows rose and he focused on me more intently. I backed up a pace and couldn’t help cupping my neck with my hand. He tilted his head and narrowed those bottomless eyes of his.

“I smell magic, but you seem human to me in every way.”

“You seem to know a lot about me and what I’ve been doing. But then if you knew a lot about me you would know I have only just found out I’m a fairy.” That sentence was convoluted, and I had confused myself. It made some kind of crazy sense, so I stood my ground and waited for his answer.

The vampire did not seem confused. “I can explain. But at night.” His eyes darted to the east and his mouth pulled down.

The sky was much lighter now, but the clouds gave extra cover. Time was running out, I was beyond terrified, the curls of fear in my stomach were tornadoes, and I felt a responsibility to protect this vampire from bursting into a firework display.

“My cupboard it is.” He placed a hand on my lower back and I jerked away. “Watch the hands,” I said and eyed him.

“I’m going to carry you,” he explained. “It will be faster and we will not be seen.”

He was not much taller than me or bigger in size. No doubt he could carry me, but still, the thought of being so close to death itself was worrisome. His presence still rubbed me up the wrong way. I was strong willed, not infallible, and me losing control would be fatal.

“No funny business. I’ll scream and dead or not, it will hurt your ears.”

He shook his head, face serious. “No funny business,” he promised.

“Could you put the fangs away?”

“I like the way you smell.”

“That is creepy,” I said and plucked at my bottom lip. “You’re creepy.”

His body kind of vibrated, and a strange grizzly sound came out of his mouth. I guess since vampires didn’t use air to talk or breathe they sounded, moved and even laughed differently to normal beings. I jumped, but thankfully he was too preoccupied with laughing to notice, or to comment on noticing.

“No biting. I swear.”

I was having a hard time. Vampires were more often than not attractive in a scary, dead, don’t look them straight in the eye, ripping throats out and wallowing in ‘top yourself’ amounts of despair, way. This vampire-boy was positively spritely. It was such a stark contrast to my preconceptions cultivated by years of Sect reports, I kept having mini flashes of the different ways he would grab me, and sink his fangs into my flesh.

“Can’t get much crazier than I already am,” I said finally, and shuddered. Another flash of watching him drink me to death had me wishing I’d stayed my ass in bed.

The vampire picked me up and broke out into a ground-eating run. I noticed then that he was not breathing and wondered if that was by choice? It was strange to be so close to another person and not sense the normal rise and fall of the chest. There was no heartbeat either. No body heat. Just this animated body walking and talking and carrying me. People said vampires were soulless, and I did not agree. They had souls, dark ones. Here I must say I also believed there were different kinds of dark. There was a dark that was evil and cruel, and there was a dark that was solitary and simply absent of light. Maybe this boy was the clear dark.

I kept thinking nice fluffy thoughts of flames that didn’t blister the skin because they looked pretty, and bolts of lightning that wouldn’t kill you dead because they were a gift from the sky. Making bad things good helped me to not freak out, and start bawling in this demons embrace. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop the thought that really mattered. This vampire needed something from me. That was the reason I was still alive. And, I concluded he must be cunning. Breandan seemed a good tracker and he’d been fooled. I was sure he would not have left me if he’d thought there was a chance I’d be in danger.

Thinking of the fairy-boy had me thinking on a new problem I had created for myself. What did I do and say the next time I saw him? Did I tell him about the vampire-boy in the wardrobe? Breandan had said he’d come back, but not when so I figured he’d probably give me a few days to adjust. He’d seemed very conscious I accept what he’d told me, and he’d made an effort to ask how I was feeling and if I’d wanted to talk about it. The vampire could die for the day in my wardrobe, ask me his questions after sunset then go on his merry way. Problem solved, because then I would wake up.

I had decided right around the time I saw the green fairy-girl that I was dreaming.

We ended back on the Temple grounds in a few blinks of the eye. At first it looked like he was going to run through the brick wall that surrounded the Temple, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I felt a jolt. Air whistled past my head and other sounds drowned in a loud whoosh. The vampire-boy did a fast movement, another bigger jolt then the wind was blowing the hair back from my face again. It was hard to

figure out the speed he ran at in the dark, but the wind on my face gave me a little thrill. If ever I needed to run away from him I'd be faster. Something struck me as a little odd. He seemed to know exactly where he was going.

I said, "You've been here before."

This was more evidence I was still sleeping safely in my bed.

"No. Your scent is distinctive."

"Huh. The key is in my left butt pocket," I said candidly.

"I see," he said. We reached my room and he threw me over his shoulder. It was neat, and swift, and not a little bit uncomfortable. "May I?"

"Uh, may you what? May you take the key, or may you drain me for dinner?"

"You have to invite me in." He sounded strained. "The hallways are public but your room is private. Invite me in."

"Sorry, I forgot. I'm a little nervous with this whole thing. I'm still waiting for you to try and take a chunk out of me. Sure, go ahead. I invite-Wait. It will only let you in right? The invitation won't throw my room wide open to all vampires, I mean."

"Only me. And I cannot extend the invitation to others. Are you satisfied? The night is over."

"I invite you to enter my room," I said and giggled. It sounded so formal.

There was a light brush against my butt then we were in my room, and he was placing me down on the bed.

"Ta," I said and fell back, rubbed my face on my blanket. It smelled like trees, rain and sunlight. I blinked. It smelled like me, but it also reminded me of Breandan.

"This is your wardrobe?" My vampire-boy did not sound happy.

"It's small, but it will do the job." He shot me a look that on a human face would have been long suffering. He was too strange looking to look anything other than intimidating. "Give me a break, it's not like this was ever a scenario I'd ever have to prepare for." I started pulling

clothes out onto the floor until the space was empty. “There,” I said with satisfaction. The space was big enough for two people. He was being prissy. I deliberated for a moment if you could catch anything from sharing with a vampire, but then gave myself a mental slap. I chucked my pillow and blanket in there and nodded. “Best I can do.”

The vampire picked up my hand and bent over. My heart stuttered and I flinched. He paused and his shoulders shook with laughter again. “No biting,” he repeated.

Keeping eye contact, he flipped my hand over and kissed my palm. The press of his skin to mine was almost beyond words. His lips were firm and the tip of his tongue wet. It was odd, cold and overly smooth, but not unpleasant. My mouth opened and I made a gasping, choking sound. I blushed from the soles of my feet right up to the tip of my ears. I tugged my hand away, hid it behind my back.

“Once you’re in I’ll close the doors, and no one will be the wiser.” I glanced out the window. “You’d better tuck yourself in now. There’s a storm, but I can see breaks in the cloud cover.”

He lacked the smooth and predatory movement of vampire as he staggered forward and collapsed into the space. We’d pushed our luck too far. He was visibly exhausted, which was fascinating to see on one of the most powerful demons in existence. Face shadowed he sighed, shifted a bit, and sat with his legs bent in font. He wasn’t very tall. It must have just been his scary vampire presence and the pulsing darkness following him around that made him seem huge to me. In a very human move he propped the pillow to the side and leaned his head.

“At sunset we will talk.”

I nodded. Pushing the hair out of my eyes I smiled at him. “Sure thing.” I went to close the door, but then stopped and yanked it open again. “Oh wait, my name’s Rae.”

His eyes were already half closed, and as he died for the day he said, “Tomas.”

Chapter Three

The storm broke at dawn. I slipped into the surge of Disciples heading into Sanctuary block as the first raindrops hit the ground. Pounding the concrete entrance stairs, I wheeled through the other bodies to get to the Hall before the bell rung. I skidded to a stop. Sanctuary Hall had cracked black marble floors and scuffed ivory walls. Electricity was hard to generate so the radiators stayed off until winter, and the temperature was on the cool side, but I liked it.

Draped across the clunky furniture, and each other, in erratic clusters the Disciples of the Sect wore two colors, black and green. Boys tended to leave their chests bare under the green blazers, and the girls rocked them shorn at the elbow or tied around the waist to show off their tattoos. Nearly all humans were marked now days; protective sigils coerced from defeated wiccans. I myself avoided it. The idea of someone so close made me sweat, no matter how pretty the ink.

I wondered what would happen if I shouted out “I’m a fairy and there’s a vampire in my wardrobe.” It would be very dramatic.

Reflexively, my gaze travelled across the bobbing heads. Alex sat alone at our bench. She noticed me and wiggled her fingers, animated by my arrival like I was something special. Rake thin and inked from head to toe, Alex confused people when they first saw her. She was too pretty to look at straight on and most slid looks her way to digest her beauty like jolts of lightening, rather than get a fist in the gut at the sight of her. Long blonde hair and sultry blue eyes contrasted startlingly with her deeply tanned skin, a few shades shy of rich chocolate.

She smiled, and the blue runes prettily decorating her cheekbones crinkled. “Hai,” she said and chucked a can at me.

I caught it one handed and tipped my chin up as thanks. Popping the top, I took a few slurping gulps and grinned at her, breakfast done.

Alex’s general attitude to life was, ‘And what?’ She didn’t give a damn what people thought of her, or what she did. If the upper dwells gave her hell or looked down on her for coming from the slums, she’d punch them in the face then ask who was next. She took the same approach in her friendships. This was why she was my only friend. She didn’t care I was a freak since she figured she was already one too.

Ambling over to our bench, I sat on the table surface and tucked a leg under my butt, left the other hanging.

Stuffing a bread roll into her mouth, Alex pretended to roll her eyes in the back of her head. “It’s all bad, Rae. Real bad,” she said around her mouthful. “I slept terrible, and there’s a bad storm coming in. My hair be all static.”

She made a big hair gesture with her hands.

Overly excited or emotional, Alex tended to slip deeper into her colloquial roots to twang like crazy. I used to have to concentrate on what she was saying when we first enrolled, her slum speak was one of the most broken and slow I’d ever heard, but after a year or so I understood her babble easy.

Relaying the horror of how a third grade had tried to ask her out, but puked, she paused to screw her eyes up. “S’up with you? You look all shiny and more frazzled than usual.”

I should take up cards because my face didn’t twitch. Keeping a neutral expression I shrugged. “Not that much.”

Her eyebrow climbed. Maybe my face was a little too composed. “You gonna share or keep evading? Don’t make me beat it out of you. I went to your room this morning to eat breakfast, but you weren’t there. Where you go? I tore this place up looking.” She leaned in, her voice hinting at naughtiness as she said, “You do something prohibited?”

My gaze flicked to then from hers, down to the floor. “I met a boy,” I said and felt my cheeks warm.

Gods, could I have not managed anything better? I knew what she’d think I’d been doing.

“I knew it, a secret rendezvous. Tell me. Is it Jono? He’s an ass, but I won’t mind if you like him. Honest. Zoe has her she-devil eyes on him but he’s had a big thing for you for months.”

I ignored the comment, held down a sigh. “You won’t understand.”

“What’s not to understand? I don’t mind who you fool with.” She slid a considering look my way. “That is, as long as it’s not Ro.”

I rubbed at my scratchy eyes and pushed some hair out of my face.

Taking a second to think on it, I decided it'd cause no harm to tell a little more of what happened. "This morning, I went for a run and I-" I frowned and searched for words that wouldn't make her freak out. Alex had a penchant for the melodramatic. "This boy," I said and flushed when I thought of Breandan. "He bumped into me. Or rather I bumped into him since he seemed to expect me. It was the weirdest feeling, like I was meant to be with him."

"Was he familiar? Someone you'd met in the upper dwells, perhaps." She sounded suspicious.

I couldn't help but smile at comparing the magnificent mental image of Breandan, next to one of the skinny, pot-hole-faced pubescent boys the dwells produced in an alarming quantity considering the human race was near extinction.

"No. He was not from the slums either before you ask. His name's Breandan."

"Hold up." She pinched the bridge of her nose then rubbed at the runes on her cheek. This told me she was agitated and I braced myself for a lecture. "This boy you met was Outside, as in beyond the Wall?"

Fiddling with the skin peeking through a slash in my jeans, I nodded. "I know what you're thinking but it's fine. Do not tell anybody. I'm dealing with it."

Her eyes widened and I realized my mistake. "You know what he is don't you? What kind of demon he is." I said nothing. To open my mouth at such a point would be a bad thing. I'd already told her much more than I had meant to. But it was nice to tell someone, who would not think I was clinically insane, and release some pressure.

"You know I won't tell anybody, but you need to never go out there again."

She looked worried, but I couldn't help but add, "He touched me, held my hand and I'd wanted him to."

It would have sounded stupid to the average person, and if it had been anyone but Alex, I would have kept my mouth shut.

As little as I'd told her, Alex's mouth popped open. "No lie, touching? You willingly placed your hand in another? Like actual skin contact."

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't tell her what really happened with

the fairy-boy. It was weird, admittedly not weirder than the vampire slumbering in my wardrobe, but still pretty messed up. Even if I tried to tell her the boy was a fairy she'd take me to get my head checked. If I said the word 'vampire' she'd probably hit the klaxon as a reflex.

"Only you could make a demon friend," she said, and to my amazement sounded jealous.

I placed a finger on my lips and shot her a look. Did she want the whole world to know?

"Keep it down, I was safe." She peered at me, seeking the truth and I composed my face to blank. It wasn't a lie per se. I just didn't divulge all details that no doubt would horrify her. "I guess you could call him a friend," I said slowly. "I don't think he'd ever hurt me in fact he helped me out of a pretty tight jam. I only told you so much because it was odd, and you would've bugged me until I told you something semi believable."

I shrugged to give the impression of nonchalance.

She was not convinced, and her pinched face told me so. "You gonna get yourself dead. I told you to forget about that damn hole. I should've made you tell a Cleric."

My voice was flat when I replied, "Whoever he was, he's long gone."

Drumming her nails on the table she shrugged. "Say-so. Let's move."

She went to grab my hand but I flinched. Rolling her eyes, she grabbed my blazer lapel instead and dragged me behind her.

Half way down the hall the morning bell rung and the corridor filled with bodies.

I gripped the strap of my bag tightly. I knew I had a class, I'd spent all morning trying to get back in time for it, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what. "What we dealing with first period?"

"Demon Theory," Alex shot over her shoulder.

A jaw-cracker of a yawn took me by surprise, and I shook off a little sleepiness. Damn straight I was on my way to class even after my pre dawn drama. I could not skip class; the punishment was not worth it. I was pretty much good at everything I tried and took eight classes instead of the six most Disciples preferred; Martial Arts, Explosives,

Subterfuge, Entomology, Demon Theory, Equestrianism and Alchemy. I was tired, and could feel a grump coming on, but I vowed to keep it together a few more hours for the sake of maintaining. My plan was to get through the day with my head down, deal with the dead thing in my closet then sleep and wake up to everything being back to normal. Rather, as normal as they were before.

Alex caught my yawn. “That must have been some run.”

I nodded faintly. Someone pushed past and bashed my shoulder. I winced. I got another shoulder bash after two more steps and became freaky alert. I hated walking the halls during period changes. Usually I’d be early or late to class and avoid the masses, but Alex liked to be on time.

I hung my head and lowered my voice. “The next person to touch me is going to be in a world of pain.”

She sent me a consolatory look then shrugged. There wasn’t much of anything you could say to make someone like me feel better.

I’d always had problems with getting close to other people. Physical contact made my skin crawl. I could only bear to be a more than a foot close for a few seconds before some peculiar reflex took over, and this horrible hissing noise started to break from my throat. It was embarrassing and practically a disability. As I child my blood had been tested a gazillion times because the Sect suspected I had demon blood, but the tests always came back negative for shifter or witch genes. The month people thought I was a witch was bad, and if I’m honest the worst of my life. Freaky and unexplainable stuff started happening when I was nearby. Naturally, the solution thought up by the community was to blame the weird kid. Having no family to protect me I had been mocked, beaten to a pulp and ridiculed. People had spat at me and even thrown stones. The matrons at the orphanage were afraid of me and did nothing; they probably hoped someone would kick me in the head too hard and take me off their hands. But I’d always been resilient and a quick healer. Bearing the burden of being hated and feared had set me apart as strong, and the Sect enrolled me in the Cleric training programme less than a season later.

As a Disciple my life was better, still difficult but better. I even had friend now.

Walking into the class, ignoring the other Disciples already in the room, I sat down and rested my cheek on my palm as Alex wandered

off to mingle.

Mind drifting, a memory of silver eyes had my heart picking up speed and turned my breathing shallow. Feeling the heat in my cheeks, a glance around showed everyone was too wrapped in their own world to notice my heaving chest. Not that people paid me much mind. Why was I getting all hot and heavy over a fairy-boy I would never see again? He said he was going to come for me, and I had used this to help me get through my encounter with the vampire, but there was no way he would risk coming onto the Temple grounds. That would be stupid, and Breandan seemed anything but stupid, right?

Bored of waiting for the lesson to start, I stood to stretch, and the satisfying pangs of my muscles loosening helped chase away some of the dull drum. Wandering from my desk, I twisted my fingers together and paced the room. There had to be something to inspire a break of remembering those cold and mad eyes. Why was he mad? He was definitely upset about having to help me back to the Temple, but why?

There was no way in hell I was ever stepping another toe past the Wall ever again, so I had to stop tormenting myself with the questions eating away at my composure. Questions like who was he? Who were the ‘we’ he kept referring to and how did he know I was a fairy? Why was I given up at birth? Were my parents still alive?

I thought I would go mad. If only I could see him one more time, talk to him again, I might actually learn something instead of being left confused and uneasy.

Glancing out the window I did a double take. Calm and still, a figure stood on the grass outside. Breandan stared at me. His eyes followed my steps as the wind and rain lashed his body. He’d found me, and he did not look happy. What could I have possibly done to make him more upset? Lifting a hand he held it out, and crooked a finger. Pulled as if tethered, I took a step forward then another. His eyes widened, face became troubled. He beckoned to me again but waved his whole hand. My pace quickened into a skip in my hurry to reach him. I fully intended on smashing through the wall and glass.

Colliding head first into a chest, I staggered back. “Excuse me,” I mumbled and cringed all over.

Body contact was difficult for me when I was focused and prepared. Unexpected, it was like experiencing a full body hiccup.

Forced to spare a glance at the boy I bumped, I felt a thrill at the heart shaped face and green eyes watching me. It was my lucky day because he was the third boy I'd seen that morning who was delightful to look at. The thought had me veering of course. Breandan was beautiful; he was a fairy, which was one of the more attractive demons in existence. The only other boy I'd seen was the vampire-boy, Tomas. Did I really think a dead guy was attractive? Hadn't I already decided his look did not appeal to me? Uh, what a nasty thought. I shouldn't find a blood drinker sexy.

I reeled myself back in and focused. Devlin, the boy I had headbutted, was a Disciple like me. He was smart, quick and strong, as most of us were, but he was also popular. The kind of Cleric in training the Priests like to parade around the civilians to inspire hope and obedience. He'd started about a month ago and was pretty much perfect at everything he did. He was adored by the girls and worshiped by the teaching Clerics. Strangely enough, he had always tried to talk to me and be nice. I'd never paid attention and ignored him because the friendliness had always seemed, forced, and had an undercurrent of falsehood. But still, I smiled back when he grinned at me, or bobbed my head when we past in the hallway since he made a big show of saying hai. Most didn't understand his interest in me, and for a while I'd been higher on everyone's radar, but after a week or so things returned to normal. When I say normal, I mean I ignored everyone and everyone ignored me. Devlin remained perfect and gorgeous, of course.

His blonde hair so light it was white, and when he smiled I had to blink. "You are excused," he said and an expression flickered across his face too fast for me to catch.

At his steady appraisal I became flustered, but I did remember I needed to get outside. I navigated around him then faltered. The space outside was empty. Rushing to the windowsill, I pressed my face to the glass and turned my head at every angle. There was nothing but well-tended grounds, Northhouse - the boy's dormitories - and the outer wall snaking around the Temple. Crushing disappointment shook me up. Stomping back to my seat I knocked into someone as I sat down. I focused on my lap and sucked it up; trying to figure out if I'd lost my mind before the next period started. A difficult task when I was not sure I was fully sane to begin with. Maybe I'd cracked at some point but hadn't recognized it yet.

Alex yanked out her seat, dumped her bag and slid into a chair beside me as the bell chimed.

Pulling myself together, I knew I needed to show good manners, and looked over my shoulder with an apology for the person I had knocked. I stiffened then looked forward, but the damage was already done. Not feeling up for a confrontation, I tried to make myself as small as possible in my seat. You know how people say if you stand up to bullies they'll back down, leave you alone, and show respect? It's a load of bull in my experience. I stood up to Zoe on my first day; I wasn't a pushover after all. She'd never laid a finger on me again, but swapped physical beatings for mental torture. Zoe was a large, sharp, pain in my ass. I wanted to be left alone to do my own thing, but she couldn't help but make me feel more like a misfit. I peeked to see if she was going to start something.

She glared at me, her heavily freckled face twisted. "Reject," she spat dragging a brush through masses of over dyed purple hair. Her sleeve fell down with the stroke and I saw she'd been marked now, a snake eating its own tail wrapped around her wrist.

Alex heard her, and whilst I sunk further down in my seat, she twisted round to flip the finger so forcefully the table rocked. She added a mouthed 'screw you' for good measure.

"You see her mark?" Alex said in a low aside to me. "Takes more than the power of the Ouroboros to purify a she-devil."

This exchange hadn't gone unnoticed, and the other Disciples turned to look at me. My morning was slowly tumbling into hell, and my best friend was not helping. Alex was older than me in age not maturity. She'd turned twenty a few months before and was a few weeks behind me in classes. I had hoped she would take the final exam the same time as me so we could go over to the Temple together. It wouldn't happen if she failed her physical. She'd have to retake the whole of grade six, and I didn't want to have to fail another exam to keep pace with her.

A milky brown skinned boy with thick cornrows threw a wad of paper at the back of Zoe's head. "Not cool, Zo. Leave her be." His black-rimmed eyes looked overly large in his thin face, and his blazer hung open to show his naked chest, belly piercing and marks. Jeans worn and slashed at the knee, his boots were scuffed and unlaced.

I smiled warmly. "Hai, Ro. Where have you been?"

"Slums, on assignment," he replied. His eyes were on Alex who now stared at the table.

I twisted round further in my seat and bit my lip. I had loads of questions I wanted to ask. The slums were melting pots of every religion, race and minority you could think of. So intermixed there was little distinction between skin colors. Occasionally you got the odd throw backs, like Alex, who were dark and some, were pale or oriental in appearance and feature, but most were a creamy tan.

Slum shacks were shabby structures tacked onto old buildings. Made from wood, plastics, metal basically any material you could get your hands on. Nothing was wasted but then nothing was fixed either. The result was a mish-mash of junk and bric-a-brac homes, riddled with drug dens and whorehouses. The occasional Sect church stood out like a bleeding human in a hungry vampire nest. The Sect took over the churches and gutted the insides to fill them with literature preaching the Doctrine that kept us safe. The luxuries held in Sect churches, like books, candles and fabric were never stolen. Not unless you wanted to be stung up naked outside the Wall for a hungry demon to come teach you a fatal lesson.

As bad as the slums were, it was the place where the most talented and down to earth people lived. For every drug dealer selling slammers, the most popular narcotic of choice since the Rupture since it suppressed the appetite, there was a talented musician strumming a tune and singing a song. For every streetwalker there was a crew of dancers doing their thing. Artists drew on the floors and sides of buildings with chunks of rough chalk, knowing that rains that came every day would wash it away, but still happy to sketch all day long. Yeah, there was good in the slums. As Disciples we had no spare time, and only got to leave the Temple grounds to either train or complete an assignment. I'd only ever had one that had taken me into the heart of the slums. I'd been dying to go back ever since.

Ro saw all the questions on my face and winked at me. "We talk all about it later and I say hai proper," he said.

It didn't take long for my mind to wander. The fairy-boy from that morning was running around the Temple looking for me, waiting for me. I hoped no one else saw him. No human could appear and disappear without a trace so quickly, and it would be clear he was 'other'. That he was a demon that had managed to get around the Wall without tripping the klaxon; after all I'd done it too. The thought of him being discovered was making me feel slightly sick. I even threw up in my mouth a little.

I heard, rather than saw Cleric Tu step into the room. I knew what

he'd look like from memory. His hair was a messy confusion of dark curls, and his shoulders were broad. He was young, cheerful and nice to look at. He was also a murderer. Few would call him that since most humans would see the death of a demon as belated justice, even the death of a demon-child.

I took a deep breath and looked up. It wasn't so bad. I didn't recoil or blanch at the sight of him. My stomach turned over but no one could see that.

Perched on the edge of his desk, he took a crunching bite of apple. My mouth watered. An apple? Fruit. Where the hell had he gotten that? He definitely had friends in high places, because there weren't many fruit bearing trees inside the Wall, and getting any fresh produce was rare. Our dietary staples were caffeine, sugar and bread. There were few people wandering around who were not emancipated looking, and it was usually a sure sign the person was a Priest or related to one. Only they could afford to eat enough to be anything other than thin. Maybe it was like a bonus scheme. Kill a demon-child and get an apple. Chucking his crimson blazer and satchel behind him, he smiled, stretched, and a few girls and guys sighed as the muscles on his torso rippled under his thin tunic.

"Who can tell me the standard attributes of identifying a demon?" he asked. Dead silence was broken by a giggle, and the squeak of a shifting chair. His eyebrows rose high at the lack of enthusiasm, mouth pulling down. "Don't make me pick you one by one."

A few hands climbed lazily.

I was too busy doodling a picture of silver eyes on my notepad to lift mine. Hs eyes had calmed me down that morning when I was half out of my mind. Maybe on paper they could help too.

"Yes, Jono," Tu said.

"Vampires," Jono, a decent looking boy from the upper dwells, began and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his crooked nose, "have a body temperature below fifteen, descendible canine teeth, fixed cellular activity and the appetite for plasma most easily found in-"

"Aint it cruel to call them demons?" Alex cut in thoughtfully. "It be like the vampires calling us bloodsacks."

Jono sent a scathing look her way, continued as if she hadn't spoken, "Shifters, can change to a single other form and this metamorphosis

tends to present itself during-"

"Why we humans always gotta be placing names on things," she added after a few beats.

"Then there are witches," said Jono through his teeth, face twisted sourly, "Who can be male or female, and manipulate matter with the power of-"

"They evil and that's that," Ro told Alex and sent her a slow smile. "What else we call them?"

"I'm speaking," Jono spat, his glare switching between the both of them.

Alex dragged her eyes from Ro's chest and glared at Jono. "Dwells," she muttered. "Think reading and writing good makes you better than us." Tipping her chin up, her voice rose. "I got as much right to talk as you do."

He sneered at her. "Life sucking mambo."

She lurched up, knocked her seat over and waved him forward. "You talk much. Let us see how you do with no teeth."

Mambos were the name of voodoo Sorcerers eradicated by the Sect nearly a decade before. It was well known that Alex's mother had dabbled in black magic, and was whispered that not only had she dabbled, but was a proficient Sorceress of the craft. Her dark past was not something the upper dwells let Alex forget, and though she did not embrace her origins, she didn't deny them either.

The sound of Tu slamming his fist on a desk cut above the shouts of encouragement from the other Disciples. "Show disrespect to the slum dwells and you disrespect me," he said and made eye contact with everyone. "Anybody does it again and we'll have a problem. Alex, cool it. "

Setting her chair right, Alex sat back down and shot daggers at everybody, mumbling obscenities under her breath. I caught her eye and saw the tears there. I wasn't the only one, for Jono flushed, the colour spreading out from his cheeks to kiss his hairline and darken his neck.

Satisfied the peace had been restored, Tu's handsome face returned to its normal cheerful mien. "Carry on," he said.

“Of course, Lord Cleric,” Jono replied somberly.

Ro, not one to forgive and forget, mimed a neck slicing action at him. He would have to watch his step in the days to come. Ro had come from the slums too, born into one of the gang families who were rumored to have a Bokor in their ranks; a man with white hair who called malevolent corpses back from the grave. I myself thought it was simply the skewed reputation of an old man who was good with herbs and medicine, as did the Temple Priests. The slums had been searched for practitioners of witchcraft and black magic, and none had been found.

“The last is goblin,” Jono continued in a somewhat humbler voice than before. “The gene presents itself from conception and is visible from birth. Disfigurement of the humanoid form can vary from slight to severe. Goblins show increased strength and animal like senses, but have notably low levels of intelligence.”

I rolled my eyes. Demon species classification was easy; a panhandler could have told Tu that information. After all, you should know the full extent of how screwed you were if a demon managed to breach the Wall and cross your path, apart from me, of course. I took a long moment to feel special then scolded myself, because my situation was dangerous and creepy, not special.

“Impressive,” Tu said dryly. “But I think you’ll find you forgot one.”

Jono looked confused. “I named all demons known to man.” He flicked a page of his textbook. His eyes widened and he pushed the book away. “I named all real demons; I didn’t think we needed to reference extinct species. Should I have mentioned the silver backed ape as well?”

A smattering of Disciples laughed, but I found nothing funny about it. So many animals had been lost during the Rupture. During the fighting it seemed everyone forgot that there were other creatures than the ones that could talk, and be heard by fighting back. Nevertheless, intrigued like others around me, I flicked to the relevant chapter in my book. I paused and scanned the summary of demons, and my eyes snagged on the name.

Tu said, “Fairy. There have been eighty-seven recorded sightings of creatures with humanoid appearance in the last year.”

I stifled a little bubble of hysteria. A grin stretched my face until I thought my lips would split down the middle. Alex sent me an odd

look, and quirked her eyebrow as if to ask ‘what’s so funny?’ I pulled my face together and waved her away.

“Lord Cleric, you’re asking us to consider fairies flying around the region sprinkling dust and spouting riddles?” Jono’s was incredulous. “They’re practically extinct.”

Ro snorted a laugh and it smothered out the wild giggle I couldn’t seem to contain.

“I think on it, and can’t believe it,” he said. “No Cleric has confirmed sighting of a fairy.” Flicking the side of his nose a few times with his thumb, he snorted again.

He caught Alex watching him from the corner of her eye and winked. She fought a smile. Looked like they were going to make up and play nice again. Ro was a complicated endeavor that Alex could not seem to get a handle on. They were always breaking up, seeing other people then coming back together again. Ro liked Alex, a lot, but he liked guys too, and it seemed to be something she couldn’t get her head around.

The class kept up this train of topic for a while and I tuned out, lazily scratching pictures into the table surface with my pen cap.

“That’s an interesting necklace you have on,” said a hushed voice.

My hand slid to cover the leather tie and circular golden pendant that hung from it. Devlin was leaning out of his chair, closer to me.

“Ta,” I said and turned back around. He moved closer. I shifted away and tried to focus on what Ro was saying, but he wasn’t finished.

“Can I see it?”

“No,” I answered frankly without looking at him.

“It’s important to you.”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why?”

He was not getting that arms crossed, face turned away signaled I did not want to talk. Scowling, I faced him. “It’s all I have from my past.”

He gave me an apologetic look. “It reminds you of your family.”

I smiled tightly. “It reminds me every day that people can throw you away like trash, and to trust no one but yourself.”

“You sound bitter,” he said thoughtfully.

“Yeah, well.” I was done with the conversation. I turned away again, slid deeper into my chair but found my hand rising. Tu signaled to me with a nod. “Sorry if this is random, I haven’t been following the conversation.” I shot a pointed look at Devlin. “Why all of a sudden are we focusing on fairies? I’ve noticed my classes in the last month keep picking it up as the main study topic.”

“We have orders to increase your training on lesser known beings, in particular fairies. There has been increased activity and sightings near the Wall.”

My heart tripped a little in my chest. “Increased?”

“Forty in the last month.”

“Where?”

Tu’s gaze bored into mine. “Here, around the Temple.”

I swallowed and scrunched my hands into fists on my knees. The silence thickened, and several sharp intakes of breath sounded throughout the room.

“Do we know why?” asked Devlin.

“No,” Tu replied. “But we can make an educated guess. This is where the greatest protectors of our race are trained. A demon gaining access to this Temple would be disastrous. They know this, and since we first came here we’ve suffered the odd attack.” He pushed his hands out in an open and calming gesture. “And that is why you should not worry. Every attack made by a demon on this Temple has failed. The Wall keeps us safe, and when it is breached we erase the danger.”

He paused and paced back and forth across the classroom floor, hands behind his back, and his eyes on the floor. His face had become drawn, dark. Is that what he thought he’d done earlier, erased a danger? My stomach lurched as my eyes wandered over his crimson blazer. It was hard to look at him straight. I wanted to stand and shout and point and tell everyone how sick and twisted he was.

“Tell me, how you would identify a fairy?” he asked as if plucking the

question from the air.

“Textbooks say fairies are the most diverse of all demon kind,” Jono started. “Some have bright colored hair and funny colored eyes but all are noted to have an in-depth connection with nature, and possess inhuman strength, speed and regenerative ability.” Jono’s mouth opened, breathing in deeply, no doubt about to spew more statistical nonsense.

My hand shot up.

Dark eyebrows climbing at the forceful thrust of my hand, Tu jerked his chin at me. “Rae, you have something else to add?” There was faint surprise in his tone.

I could admit I was a more sit in silence then ace all my exams type. But just looking at him had all sorts of questions swirling around my mind.

“Lord Cleric,” I said thickly then had to grunt a few times to clear my windpipe, for bile had risen at having to address this man with the honorific. “I know despite the reports of sightings that fairies are rare, but have Have you ever seen one? Up close, I mean? “

He stopped pacing, and his mouth opened then closed. He stared at me hard before rubbing a large hand over his face. “No. I have never seen a fairy. They are incredibly rare demons.”

I cocked my head and my mouth won out over logic. “Have the Clerics ever caught a fairy? They hunt vampires and shifters all the time, but I’ve never heard of them actually catching that particular type of demon.”

From the corner of my eye I saw Devlin shift in his chair. I was not surprised. People didn’t question Clerics like this. The only reason I was managing it is because I’d seen Tu in his most base form. He had lost all my respect so it was nothing to talk to him as an equal.

His eyes went wild, glassy with repressed panic. Could no one else see it? “Like I said they are so rare-”

The direction of my thought changed abruptly, “If they haven’t,” I interrupted and tapped Alex’s textbook with a finger, “how does the Sect know to put such detail in our books?”

Now I’d looked, they’d even described different variations of fairy

coloring. Once you'd seen it, it was so striking it was not something you could ever forget. How could the Sect know that, and why had I not noticed before?

His eyes darted to and from mine. He placed his palms up, pushed them out. "Such beings are commonly-"

My mind flashed to the fairy in the clearing, all that blood and sizzling skin. The ruthless way he had behaved made my gut churn and my expression darken. "The Sect is lying." Someone to my left made a choking sound of disbelief. "They must have studied these demons, and for some reason you don't want us to-"

Tu slammed his beefy hand on the desk. "Enough," he barked.

I jumped, snapped my mouth shut.

Stunned at his own outburst, he blustered around with some papers on his desk and cleared his throat. "That is enough on this subject for today." His voice was quiet, distracted. "Team up and turn to page sixteen of your textbooks to discuss and summarize the proposed vampire reproduction. Start. I'll be back shortly to check your progress." He spun on his heel, avoided looking at me and left the class.

Snapped from my single-minded quest for truth, I flushed at the number of people staring at me. I shot a look at Alex who was wide eyed, pouty mouth hanging with a chocolate bar resting on her bottom lip. It was foolish for me to call such attention to myself, and plain stupid to insult the Sect. Pulling my hood up, I breathed out, and tried think of a reasonable explanation for my behavior. Skipping out of class wouldn't help; it would confirm any suspicions. Tu was one of the Clerics who had hunted me this morning. No doubt he was on his way to inform the others of my weird behavior and the direction of my questions. Great, talk about staying under the radar.

A sharp pain on my arm made me yelp. Alex's face popped into view. "Damn, Rae. You zoned hard."

"What class is next?" I asked. I wondered if I should consider ditching. If the Clerics thought I was a danger maybe I needed to leave now. If they found out I was a demon Wait. How would they ever know that? Gods, I was becoming melodramatic.

"We got Subterfuge," Alex replied, "but I might ditch."

I eyed her like she'd lost it. Why would she do that on a whim? Disciples who were caught ditching had to do bereavement duty. It meant helping the morgue deal with the remains of any poor misfortunate's that got taken out by demons who'd breached the Wall. You helped cremate dead bodies and notified any next of kin. Most times it was kids who'd stayed out too late, or had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was the Clerics duty to protect, and when they failed they made sure they grieved with the families, and showed them respect. I only considered it because my life might be on the line.

The class divided up into little clicks and Ro came over. He made a silly face at me then grinned. I built myself up mentally, knowing what was about to come next. Hauling me up, he wrapped his arms around mine and kissed my cheek. "I missed you, Rae." He was several heads taller than me, and my feet lifted from the floor as he squeezed. Roland, Alex's on off steady, was nice. He'd always talk to me if he saw me around the compound even when he and Alex were on outs. I wouldn't call him a friend since I only knew him and maintained a relationship because he was important to Alex.

And that's why I let him hug me, didn't punch him in the face and said, "You too." I shifted, a subtle signal for him to let go, but he remained uncomfortably close. I extracted myself. "How was it? The assignment, I mean."

I was genuinely curious. I hadn't lived in the slums before I came to the Academy. I had been tied to the Sect since birth, and held in orphanages in the upper dwells. I was one of the lucky ones. Those without parents generally became panhandlers, beggars prey for any hungry demons that hid behind the Wall. Plus, I loved the creative atmosphere of the place.

"A goblin kid hid in a shack close to the Sect church, a simple catch and release." He shrugged, shifted on the spot. "Same old thing. Dirty and cold, but it be my home, y'know?" He paused and made a clicking noise with his tongue, a sound one made unconsciously before bringing up a touchy or dangerous subject. It was a slum dwell habit I knew he'd been trying to get rid of for a while. "Something happened to you this morning?"

I pressed my lips together. Ro was perceptive, more than was usual for a boy his age. That or I looked worse than I thought. I worked hard to keep most of the kooky crap I did away from Alex. It would only worry her. The stuff from this morning would probably give her grey

hairs. Ro looked like he was ready to buckle down and figure what was wrong with me. Maybe his well timed words and snorts earlier were trying to accomplish more than just derision. Maybe he was trying to cover up the fact I was giggling like a banshee during what was supposed to be a serious discussion. Whatever issues I had about how cooped up we were behind the Wall or how purist the teachings of Sect had become, the Temple was my home. Suggestions bound to get me into serious trouble stayed locked firmly inside my mind, most of the time. Disciples who'd voiced radical ideas like my own ended up failing the final exam or kicked out of the Sect. Then there were the ones who disappeared entirely. That was not going to happen to me. Ro and I had had a few very brief discussions about this. Touched on the subject more than once, how some things the Sect did and said didn't quite add up. How Disciples going missing, after they had spoken up about the treatment of demons we captured, was just plain wrong. Ro had always been keen to talk more, but I'd always pulled back.

"I went Outside," I said and lifted my chin. "I ran in the forest."

Alex groaned and plucked at the skin of her throat as if it irritated her. She'd already known this and her reaction was purely knee jerk.

Ro didn't look surprised, if anything mildly impressed. "Did something happen?"

I tilted my head, hearing something unspoken in the words. "Why'd you think that?"

"You on edge, and earlier you went pale like you seen you a ghost. You got so shook up you forgot yourself and walked right into Devlin. Rae, you always so careful and cautious about touching, and you got so distracted you forgot?" He shook his head. "I don't think so, something big happened."

I swallowed before I answered, "I saw-" Was I really going to tell him?

"I'll tell you something else," Ro began, speaking slowly and looking down at his hands looped in his jean pockets. "Maybe on my way to class, I hear a Lord and Lady Cleric talking about a problem with a demon Outside this morning. Maybe I hear them talking about a Disciple who broke Doctrine and went beyond the Wall. They say a Disciple disobeyed and even struck out, gave the Lady Cleric a black eye." He looked up at me and lowered his voice an octave. "You need to be careful now, you feel me? Think about the questions you ask in

class and the way you react to some words. Likefairy, eh?"

"What are you getting at?" I tried to pretend the shrillness of my voice was natural.

I couldn't tell them what had happened, if the Clerics were looking for me there was only a matter of time before they found me. I was bound to slip up again. I had a bloody vampire snoozing in my wardrobe for gods sake. I had decided the best was to play this was to not confirm or deny anything else. Ro would try to help me and his heart would be in the right place, but I couldn't risk it.

As for Alex "You do remember the Rupture? What happened to people like you who wouldn't get in line and act right," she said angrily.

She was not happy and I could sense a long, rambling speech coming on. With all the information I'd told her and Ro's speculations, she would have been able to piece together quite a bit by now.

Opening my mouth to tell her to shut the hell up, I saw Tu enter the room talking to a thin woman. She was dressed in a crimson blazer with a swollen eye and bandaged arm. A Lady Cleric, the Lady Cleric from that morning.

Chapter Four

I straightened and ordered my feet to freeze mid step back. My heart pounded double time as every instinct I had screeched at me to run and hide. They really were looking for me, and knew the one they sought was a Disciple. The Lady Cleric's gaze slowly passed over every female face in the group as she replied to Cleric Tu. My stomach clenched and sweat beaded my brow. Did her gaze linger on me? Did she hesitate to move on, or was it my imagination?

I wanted to scream at her that it was an accident. That I had no idea what all the crazy stuff happening around me meant, nor did I want to. I wanted to rewind a day, back to when things were simple. Where my life made sense and where boys spoke and acted normally. Where Clerics were the good guys who protected us from demons and my teachers were not heartless murderers.

The Lady Cleric scanned our faces once more than shook her head once. She left with Tu close behind her, whispering something to him.

What did I do? Surely if they had identified the Disciple in the forest was me, they would have hauled me out the class.

Alex glanced over her shoulder at the retreating Cleric, but was otherwise uninterested. Ro was more on ball, and his eyes narrowed as he watched me. Too messed in the head to try and be subtle, I glared at him, daring him to comment. Well, there was nothing I could do. I'd had enough of being stressed out. Slouching back into my chair, I kicked up a leg on the empty seat opposite and mud fell off my soles.

"Are you even listening to me?" Alex asked.

"I'm sorry, what? Oh, yes," I said. "Yes, I do remember."

The Rupture was a global slaughter that had nearly wiped the entire human race of the face of the planet. It had changed everything. Vampires had emerged from the shadows one winter dragging all manner of wicked with them, and in one clean sweep had consumed the earth. Shapeshifters had prowled the streets in daylight. Hunting were-bears, were-lions and were-whatever-the-hell-you-can-think-of had feasted on human flesh. Goblins tore people limb from limb and roasted them in dumpster-sized stew pots. Raped the screaming women, and produced more deformed offspring. Powerful witches cast

spells that stopped the hearts of entire cities, made all things in a thousand-mile radius just stop.

Within weeks governments had fallen. Monarchy's had been eliminated, a warped genocide, madness. No one but the crazies who had believed in such things was prepared. They knew how to protect themselves with stakes and silver, hiding places underground. Otherwise only the strong, quick and the smart had survived. The barbaric culling of the human race left us scattered across the world in tiny pockets of civilization. Communities of people who put aside old hates based on colour and religion, and blended together until the human race was a convergence unlike anything ever predicted. We lived in an overcrowded region of land surrounded by electricity, a patch of city untouched by the horror Outside.

At least, that's what the Priests told us in their sermons. Most people alive now-a-days were too young to remember what had happened, and the old ones who had experienced it had died of old age years before. Against all odds endangered humankind had survived and had the Sect to thank. A group of human men and women had erected the Wall, and set the strongest of us as guardians. Determined to keep fighting and to survive at all costs, they selected new protectors from the masses seeking sanctuary and trained them to hunt the monsters that had stolen the planet. Those protectors were the Clerics. They hunted down any demon that dared step on our territory. Of course I remembered the Rupture; it was something I, nor any other being, would ever forget.

Clicking her fingers in front of my face, Alex flicked my nose and I recoiled. She smirked, happy to have broken into my down time. "You wanna end up like the people who lost their lives for nothing?"

"Wouldn't call marching up to the closest demon and trying to kill it, nothing," I said. Chewing my bottom lip, I cautioned myself to be careful. "I ran that's all. I just ran."

"Thinking on it, I don't believe you," Ro said.

I shrugged. I couldn't tell them, it was too big.

Alex placed her palms on the table. My eyes darted from hers to the small runes that decorated the back of her hands. "The Wall keeps us safe. It keeps those demons out and us humans in. That's the way it be, Rae. If a vampire or goblin were to lay hands on you-" She shuddered, her eyes becoming hollow with visions of death and gore

from years past. “Your life here means something. Don’t throw it away.”

“The Rupture happened lifetime’s ago. Who knows what it’s like out there?” I leaned forward and lowered my voice to match hers. “They may have changed, evolved.” I thought of Breandan and Tomas. “Y’know, I don’t think he Sect have been honest about what they’re like.”

“Evolved? Demons be animals, dangerous animals driven by need, nothing more.” She took a deep breath. “The Doctrine of the Sect is law. Clerics keep the law, and Doctrine says going beyond the Wall is forbidden. The rules keep us safe.” She visibly relaxed as she said the words.

Familiar frustration bubbled inside me at her lack of curiosity. “What if that’s not how it’s supposed to-Forget it,” I said and ducked my head. I felt her eyes on my face and I carefully kept it blank, my gaze cast down to the floor.

I couldn’t force her to change her mind in a minute, nor did I want to. She was the one making sense and thinking clearly. I was the one making waves, and allowing dangerous beings to run riot unchecked and unopposed.

A voice said close to my ear, “Am I to keep the vampire in your wardrobe a secret?”

I jerked up and Devlin leaned back, grinning impishly. I swear, if I had not spent a lifetime controlling my face and emotions, I probably would have launched myself at him shrieking. Ro had wandered off across the room, and I hadn’t seen Devlin sidle up, too lost in my thoughts. How the hell did he find out? He must have seen Tomas carrying me across the Temple, but Tomas was sure we would be moving to fast to be seen. Panicked, I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I didn’t know what to say. Oh Gods. Devlin gazed at me, green eyes clear and sharp. I decided the best plan was to deny it. To call him deluded or whatever I had to get him off my back. It was his word against mine, and though I was considered freaky, the mere suggestion I had a vampire in a wardrobe was just crazy. But then hadn’t my behavior had been somewhat suspect? I glanced around. Devlin coming over to talk to me captured the attention of the entire class, but no one seemed overly alarmed.

“What?” I said in a perfection imitation of cluelessness, but I knew my

face was white as snow and my voice brittle.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anybody. What fun would that be?”

He was still leaning close over me, speaking right into my ear so no one else could here. To the casual observer it may have looked like he whispered sweet nothings in my ear. My heart sunk. What did he have in mind? Blackmail?

“Why are you doing this?” I asked in a low voice. “Just go away.”

I sank further into my seat and turned my head away slightly, clearly giving the message I didn’t want to talk anymore. Childish tactics, but confrontation didn’t seem to work, maybe ignoring him would. He had that amused smirk that made his face look smug and I found myself detesting his presence. There was something decidedly off about him, and the perfection of his face was making me sick.

He turned to Alex, narrowed his eyes and moved his lips without sound. Maybe if I acted bored of this theatrics he would get the message and leave. I watched him with cool detachment.

He spoke to me whilst keeping his gaze on her, “This is a female of strength. You choose your friends well.” His fingers, seemingly infused with light, brushed her check.

I didn’t like that and I smacked his had away. Alex started, as if coming to from a trance and sent me a baffled look.

“Who’s the boy outside?” Ro said from across the class.

I shot up. Devlin backed away a pace, as if I was suddenly too close for comfort. I excused myself and walked speedily to Ro’s side, all the while telling myself the fairy-boy I’d met that morning would never dare. He would know he could not show up here at Temple, and parade around half naked, and glowing. I reached the window and made a strangled noise. Breandan. At least he’d had the good sense to glamour himself human. His eyes flicked from me to behind me, and then he beckoned to me.

“Rae, you know him?” Ro asked and eyed me head to toe. A slow smile spread across his face, and the green beads he’d tied into the end of his cornrow plaits clicked together as he laughed. “You be keeping secrets, eh?”

“Yes,” I said, took a step backwards. “I mean I don’t know” In truth I

was not surprised Breandan was there. I just wondered how long he intended to follow me and if his ultimate goal was to have me strung up Outside by the Clerics.

Breandan waved at me, impatient this time.

“He seems to know you.” Ro ran his tongue over his top teeth. “If you don’t want him, I’ll take him.”

Breandan stood on the grass with his hands loose by his sides and somehow, through the rain, I saw the storm in his eyes threatening to drown me. He didn’t beckon to me again, but I knew he wanted me to go to him. Afraid of the hot, fluttery feeling spreading through my limbs, I shook my head hoping he got the message. This was not okay. He could not come here and expect me to run off with him into the forest like a lunatic.

His head drooped then snapped up, his gaze directed over my shoulder.

“Rae, you right?” Alex asked from beside me. “What’s going on?” Then she spotted Breandan scowling at me. “That’s him? The boy from this morning?”

A few other Disciples got up out their desks and came over to look out the window at whatever it was we were looking at. I took a few steps back until I bumped into someone standing behind me. Devlin stood in my way and looked furious. What was his problem? He was the one on my back, not the other way round. Then his shoulders started to shake and I realized he was laughing. He looked straight at me and smiled. No. Not a smile, but a snigger filled with wicked delight. The intensity of his stare boldly probed mine, and the chill that slithered down my spine had me wound to near breaking.

When I looked back round Breandan’s entire body tensed, and just like that, with one last glance at me he turned and darted away. A sense of relief was replaced by a fiercer surge of regret. The moment he winked out of sight the longing to see and feel him, pressed upon my consciousness. The emotion was like a splinter burrowed beneath the skin, determined to settle in for the long haul.

I thought then about telling a Cleric, Breandan, a demon from beyond the Wall, could get onto the Temple grounds. Why was I was covering for some boy I barely knew? Yes, he’d told me I was a demon, but what if that had been a lie. I looked pretty damn human to my eyes. Yes, I’d done some demon stuff, but I could be a witch. The thought

made me very nervous. All witches were bad, forces of evil. Did I really want to wish to be one? My mind wandered back to Breandan, the boy who made me warm and tingly when I thought about him. And that is why I resolved to keep my mouth firmly shut. That and the fact I was hiding one of the scariest of demonkind in my wardrobe.

Ro stared out the window, confused. Unlike me, he was not used to the fairy disappearing act, and I could see him trying to figure out how Breandan had left so quickly. The other Disciples had lost interest and had wandered into small groups again.

It was all getting a bit much for me, and I couldn't keep up. My head felt light, spongy, and my limbs weak. I was hiding so many things from so many people my brain felt like it was being pried apart. Alex seemed to sense my stress since she dragged me out the door by my sleeve the moment the bell rang.

"C'mon," she said. "We got Alchemy and I don't want to be late."

Stumbling out the door, I waved goodbye to Ro. "But, I thought you were ditching," I said, trying to keep up mentally.

"I need to keep my eye on you."

Skipping out the room, I watched the back of her bobbing head. Breathing in I focused on her drama instead of mine. "You like Ro, a lot," I said.

Pushing out the side door to take a shortcut through the courtyard in the middle of the building, we carefully trudged down the slippery pathway and she shot me evil eye. Pulling up our blazer collars, we raced across and the rain pelted hard against my skin. My feet splashed in every puddle along the way and the wind tugged on my body. Storms never bothered me. The power and beauty of the sky churning, clouds darkened with rain and flashes of lighting made my skin goosy. We made it through the heavy doors, and I rung out my hair and clothes as best I could, wiping my dripping face on my wet sleeve.

"I don't do steadies," Alex said. She strutted off and I trailed behind, smiling into my shoulder.

Ro would be the perfect steady for Alex. He would take care of her, and love her for more than her beauty. She knew this, and though she kept going on and on about his fondness for guys when he wasn't with her, that's what the real problem was. He saw through the cocky

smiles, the extrovert character to what she was about.

Marriage was an old and tired concept. The last union performed around a century before, about the time the last of the old religions died out. But if it were practiced they definitely would be suitable candidates in my mind. People didn't tie themselves to each other anymore. Why should they? Chances were you'd find somebody who appealed more in a few years. People knew it was best to keep it simple. There were romantics, of course, who feel in love and ran away to other regions to start new lives. Two Disciples had tried that idea three years ago, and had tried to travel to the next region by going Outside. The Clerics had us Disciples visit their graves once a year as a reminder of what happens to the stupid and irresponsible.

"Lex, I can't," I said and stopped walking.

She spun round and frowned. "Can't do what?" Her face smoothed. "Rae, if we don't turn up to class-"

"I know," I cut in and backed away. "You go on. I'm going to go sit in the Library for a while. Cover for me? Say I have a headache and went for some quiet time. I'll deal with the punishment." I didn't wait for her answer, and took off at a run back down the hallway.

Walking into the Library, I gave myself a mental pat. It was empty and blessedly quiet. The library was just a bunch of bookcases pushed against the wall and a few tables and benches arranged in the centre. It smelt musty, but not unpleasant, as if it had been a while since the air was last disturbed.

I settled down on a table with a low lamp and closed my eyes, enjoying the stillness. Here I could be at peace. I drummed my fingers on the tabletop. Then I ran them through my hair and frowned when I encountered tangles. I redid my makeshift hair bun, trembling a little when I fingered the twig and remembered what had happened after I had found it. I scrunched up my face then relaxed it again. Scrunch and relax. Urgh, but my mind was not quiet. It was shrieking at me, throwing back everything from that morning. Closing my eyes did not change the fact I had a vampire in my wardrobe that was going to reanimate in a few hours. My mind lingered on thoughts of Tomas's dark, bottomless eyes and the fact Devlin somehow knew he was in my wardrobe. How did he know? How, how, how? Breathing in deeply did not fix whatever genetic quirk made me a demon. Oh gods, how could I be a demon? Shouldn't I have figured that out by myself? Why did someone have to point out such obvious things for me to

finally add it all together to equal demon? As my thoughts touched on Breandan, my body went haywire. My heart sounded to pound and my hands became slick with sweat. Where was he? Would I see him again? In the space of one morning my whole life had been turned upside down, yet the thought of never seeing or touching him again wasunbearable.

I got irritated with myself. I'd come to the Library for a quiet place to think and figure out what I was going to do, not moan about what had already happened. I needed a plan of action. I needed to remain calm, and collected, and work this thing out. I tried to get comfortable on the hard wooden seat, but the feeling of discomfort that had appeared when Breandan left had lingered, and in the last few minutes had changed slightly. The splinter wasn't burrowing under my skin anymore, but had almost, insistent. Like, 'look here I am'.

The door opened. Sounds and smells of the world rushed in, breaking my reflective bubble. I jerked up. In a lifetime of habit, I shied inward and prepared myself to become part of the furniture.

A boy, blazer collar turned up sauntered into the room. White hair flopped down to conceal one of his sparkling eyes. The gods be damned, it was Devlin. Rather than launching into a tirade of accusations like I expected, he said nothing. He simply stared at me like I was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen. It made me feel like a butterfly, entangled in a web of lies, and waiting for the spider to pounce.

The solid silence was driving me mad. "Hai, Devlin." My voice was strained.

"You don't like me very much," he said.

A few responses played on my lips before I chose, "Direct."

"That boy we saw outside Demon Theory, how long have you known him?" I looked away, stayed silent. "It was a simple question." He paused. "Boys from the slums can be dangerous." His voice held an undercurrent of humor that I didn't like. It was like he knew Breandan was not from the slums. Like he knew he was

I looked down at my shoes. "I'm not talking about this."

"May I ask why?"

There was that odd speech pattern again. There were so many

different dialects mixed in with the broken slum speak, that it was difficult to determine someone's roots just by how they spoke unless they told you. I knew next to nothing about Devlin, but his manner of speaking was familiar to me. Where had I heard it before?

"Not your business," I replied succinctly.

His face darkened, as if he had guessed the direction of my thoughts.

"What do you want, Devlin? Making good on a bet to embarrass the misfit?" My cheeks got hot. "Why do you keep trying to be friends with me and how did you know about-" I shut up. I was meant to be pretending I didn't know what he was talking about when he said I had a vampire in my wardrobe. Scrunching my brows, I shook my head. "I don't know you, and you're questioning me? Being a fellow Disciple does not give you a hold over me. Despite what you think I can talk to whoever I like. It's my business and I'm dealing, so stay out of it."

His eyes lit with a shocking fierceness and I jerked back. His constant intensity was disconcerting, but he seemed to know nothing else to be a threat to me. Clearly, he'd managed to catch a glimpse of Tomas, put the pale skin, fast movement together and figured, vampire. But to prove it he would first have to get someone to listen and believe him so that he could be allowed into the Bayou, the girl's dorms, to show them. Would he risk his reputation on a whim like that? I was panicking for no reason. He had nothing. I managed a polite smile. I stood up and marched past him.

"Well, I'll see you around." He grabbed my arm and I lashed out with a hard shove. "Why can't you back off?"

He staggered back and lowered his brows at my rudeness. I pushed him so hard his blazer flapped back off his shoulder and I saw a flash of green and gold swinging from his neck, resting on his chest above his heart. He had a pendant like mine. It explained why he was so interested in the one I wore. His was different though, bigger and darker in colour. Huh, despite his interesting taste in jewellery, I was still pissed at him. I was raw and not fit for any other surprises. A girl can only handle so much crazy. I'd told him to leave me alone, but he didn't seem to take subtle and even blatant hints. It was time to be rude. My shaking hand pushed the hair from my eyes so I could glare properly.

"Why do you keep popping up? Everywhere I go there you are." As I

said the words I realized how true they were. He was always nearby, lurking somewhere. I'd never seen it before then.

"So what if I am following you?"

I scowled. He wasn't even going to try and deny it. "If you are then stop."

"Of course, but I want you to give me something first."

The door swept open again. My heart skipped a whole two thumps then pumped at double time. Because Breandan stepped into the room, his bare feet silent on the stone floor. He let the door of the library close with a dull click, and his gaze flicked between us. If I could have picked one person to never join the conversation I was having with Devlin, Breandan would be that person. Clearly the universe was out to get me.

Irritation twisted Devlin's expression before it settled into overly pleasing handsome lines. His lips twitched and his attention locked solely on me.

My head swung from one to the other unsure of where to focus. As if one stupidly good-looking boy wasn't hard enough to deal with, I now had two messing with my mind. I sat down heavily on the nearest bench I could find and put my head in my hands. I was beginning to think it possible for your head to explode from stress.

Breandan straddled the bench and settled close by me. He sighed. "You can't help but find trouble," he said.

My rude response caught in my throat. I stared at his guarded face and wanted to scream at him. I wanted to demand to know what he was doing exposing himself and me like this, and tell him to get lost.

All I whispered was, "You shouldn't be here."

Something shifted in his expression, and told me he knew how much I was freaking out, since he smiled.

He touched my cheek. "We are safe."

"Am I interrupting?" Devlin asked icily.

His hands were fisted both sides of him, and his lips had a rigid set. Blazer hanging open, I glimpsed his impressive physique as he turned

his gaze to Breandan. Impressive but odd, he didn't have any marks. All boys had marks. Not as many as Breandan, who had enough tattoos for three, but Devlin's skin was completely pure.

"Rae, aren't you going to introduce us?" he asked and stared at Breandan.

Without looking at him, Breandan replied as he entwined his fingers with mine. "I'm no concern of yours."

Fingers firm and warm rubbed against mine. I was hyper aware of the touch. It reminded me of the last time I had my hand in another's, in a vampires. That thought pulled me up short. The vampire had touched me and I'd let him. Wow. I was seriously messed up. Years of being unable to interact with others, and I let demons drape themselves all over me. I tugged my hand away but it was a pitiful attempt. More for the sake of telling myself I had resisted, rather than actually wanting him to let me go.

"Interesting," Devlin said. "I thought only Disciples, Clerics or Priests were allowed at Temple. I'm new here, but I've never seen you before. When did you enroll?"

They peered at each other warily. Backs straightening and necks stiffening, they became silent.

A pressing need to defend Breandan had me stuttering, "It's no big, Devlin. He's my, uhguest." I shrank back as Devlin's glare turned on me. The last thing I needed would be for him to run and spill Breandan was on Temple grounds. I did tug my hand away this time and fisted it on my lap. I felt annoyingly bereft that he had released me. "I want him here," I added in a rush.

Breandan went still beside me, and I felt his focus shift to my face.

It grew cold. The lights flickered and ominous silence draped over me. A weird feeling crawled over my skin, so I tensed. The lights blacked out. The room temperature hit rock bottom, and an icy gust of air lapped at the back of my neck. I clutched Breandan's hand tight in mine again. Was it him doing this? He needed to stop because he was making it a little too obvious that he didn't belong. I squeezed the hand I held. The moisture in my eyes stung, and the pores on my skin shrank. Then 'it' passed and the lights came back up. The air warmed.

"Power outage," I said tactfully.

My mind was not able to deal with the concept of anything other than that. It was an easy lie. Breandan snorted and rested an arm over my shoulder. He made soothing circles on my wrist. It was nice, the lazy soft brushes against my skin.

“Rae,” Devlin said slickly, “Would you like to come with me? Somewhere private.” He smiled, nice and slow. The kind of smile that suggested not much talking would be going on once he got me alone. “We could get to know one another some more?”

Confused at his sudden suggestive undertone, rejection was on the tip of my tongue. I had a vampire to get back to, so my plan was to extract myself from this conversation as soon as I could and leave. Who knew what Tomas would do if I was not there when he woke up. All of this had passed through my mind in a split second then flew out as quick. Breandan’s reaction to the invitation was explosive. Snarling, he moved startlingly fast and blurred into a dark streak, a shadow.

Chests heaving and eyes blazing the boys faced off nose to nose.

I was confused and stared at the vacant spot the fairy-boy was moments ago. My reactions caught up and I made a noise of alarm. I jumped up to push Breandan back a few paces, with difficulty since he packed a truck-load more muscle and height than me. I tugged his chin down to look him in the face. Tense seconds clicked by as I looked into the eyes of someone alien to me. Breandan glared at me with traces of disgust and disbelief. I felt bad and annoyed because I wanted answers from him, but I couldn’t have him butting heads with other Disciples. If Devlin told a Cleric I’d let a strange boy into Temple, I’d come under question. Hell, if Devlin threw in he knew I was hiding a vampire in my wardrobe, I would never see the light of day again. They would probably lock me away for the rest of my life. Or kill me if they could prove I was a demon and a threat.

“I think you should go,” I said wearily.

The horrible moment passed and Breandan’s face gentled into exasperation and impatience. The shift was so fast; I floundered, unable to account for the sudden change. Chuckling to himself, his arm propelled me towards the door picking up my bag as we went.

“Walk me out,” he said cheerfully, he even had a spring in his step.

Wasn’t I doing a dandy job of extracting myself from this situation? I was meant to be in my room by now, waiting for my guest to wake up so I could answer his questions and get rid of him. Instead, I was

walking out a fairy that seemed happy to be in mortal peril, for that was the situation for any demon on Temple grounds.

“You have my word no harm will ever come to you that will be of my making,” a voice said in my ear. I turned to look Breandan in the eyes, sincere and warm. “I will always protect you. Even when you don’t me to,” he added after a small pause.

“I’m not afraid,” I said tartly and took a half step before drawing deep and taking another larger one. I lowered my voice, “And I can take care of myself. By doing what you did back there you’ve painted a big target on my back. I need to be careful after what happened this morning and you are putting me in danger by just being here, and throwing your weight around. Devlin is a Disciple, a popular one at that. He could get me into serious trouble. Besides, I think I’d be safer with him than I ever would with you.”

He raised an eyebrow then became thoughtful.

As we left Sanctuary, cool air blew into my face and the speckles of ash that floated by were comforting, familiar. It was tinged with smoke now the fires had been lit in preparation for the night. The days were short so close to winter.

Breandan moved ahead of me and took my hand. Before long I heard a group of Disciples nearby, their high and happy voices floating through the dark coming straight toward us. He turned so we no longer walked on the path to the main gate but out onto the lawn surrounding the Temple, into the darkness. Over my shoulder I saw Devlin followed silently and he didn’t look alarmed but rather annoyed. Rather than an all-dark figure, I made out his angular features and the green of his eyes. With a start I realized everything looked lighter, and then I saw why. Breandan’s tattooed skin glowed in the dark. It was like he wanted to get caught. Like he really didn’t care Devlin could name him as demon.

Said boy pushed between us, and grabbed my hand to pull me forward. My skin crawled. I tried to pull away but he held on firmly. Breandan held on and stopped moving. I was stuck between the two and Devlin was determined to keep going, so I squeaked when my arms nearly yanked out of their sockets. Brendan growled, literally hunched his back and bared his teeth. The sound was a low rumble, but resonated loud enough to be taken as a warning. Despite this display he had to let me go to avoid hurting me, but he was not happy about it.

Devlin barely broke stride as he half turned and smirked. Turning back to my puzzled face, he feigned innocence. “Possessive isn’t he?”

I looked over my shoulder and sent Breandan a wobbly smile. The reason known only to the complicated workings of my heart, I wanted to reassure him that I was okay. Jaw working soundlessly, he walked close behind us and kept his eyes locked on Devlin’s long fingers wrapped around mine.

Devlin let my hand go and I sighed in relief, we reached the Temple wall and I wondered what was coming next. Breandan seemed quite unconcerned at how this was turning out, and I was curious to see where this adventure was headed next. Seriously, where was it headed? There was no way through the barrier here unless you could jump higher than twenty feet like a vampire, or scale smooth, seamless concrete.

“Rae, place your hands over your eyes” Devlin said.

I planted my feet, ready to fight it out. Whatever these boys were planning would not go down as easy as they thought. “I will not close my eyes. Do you think I’m that stupid?”

He blinked in shock; face dumbly surprised. It was like he’d never been told ‘no’ before.

The side of Breandan’s mouth tugged up. “Please close your eyes,” he simplified.

Breandan was asking me to do what Devlin wanted? Why? I looked between them. Something else was going on in front of me, wasn’t it? Thoughts swirled in front of my eyes. Devlin had joined the Sect a month ago. The sightings of fairies at the Wall by the Temple had increased in the last month. Breandan had been looking for me and the vampire a month. Devlin had not reacted to Breandan’s presence, or his strangeness with shock or fear. The fairy-boy had done some freaky stuff, like strutting around bare foot, glowing and growling. These were not human traits. More than this, Breandan had revealed himself to Devlin, even spoken to him.

“You know each other,” I said, the challenge for denial clear in my voice.

“Yes,” the boys replied.

I blew out a breath. “May I ask how?”

“Ye-”

“Not yet,” Breandan said.

They were both on edge again. I had a feeling this was only remaining peaceful for my benefit.

“I don’t like not knowing what you’re dragging me into. I don’t think I’m so curious anymore.”

“I told you, you are safe.” Breandan seemed annoyed I had not trusted his word. “There are other things you need to know and see,” he explained, “Before I can tell and show you everything.”

“And right now you don’t want me to see how you got in here,” I guessed. After a few moments of stubborn silence, I shrugged and did as Breandan asked. “I don’t see how this is going to-”

My eyes flew open and I gasped. Breandan’s lips were pressed against mine. His eyes were open, watching me. He leaned away a little and made a low humming noise.

“This would be easier if you trusted me,” he murmured. “I’ll come back soon. Behave until then.” He leaned back in, but paused. “And Rae, do not agree or give anything you don’t want to.” His eyes flicked to Devlin and his eyes narrowed into slits. His gaze darted back to mine. “Alright?”

Confused, I nodded and closed my eyes as his lips met mine again. When I opened them again he was gone. My first kiss, and it had made my toes curl in my boots and my heart swell. I swallowed thickly and looked to the west. The sun had nearly set. My vampire-boy would rise soon.

Devlin stared at me, considering. “I can almost see the questions tumbling around that head of yours.”

“I’ll even tell you a few. At best guess you’re some kind of demon pet,” I said and paused deliberately. “A human spy feeding the fairies information, I mean.” I didn’t give him a chance to answer. I started to walk away but then I spun around. “You haven’t told anyone about the person you saw me with this morning have you?” He said nothing for a long while and I looked up in alarm. At the steady, appraising look he was giving me I felt a tide of stupid rising inside me, and I stared to babble, “You’re not double crossing demons are you? By working for the Sect and pretending to be the demons inner eyes and

ears, because that would be really dumb."

"As dumb as stashing a vampire in a wardrobe?"

I swear my face must have turned the colour of snow again. Devlin rocked on his heels, sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully. I caught the smile he tried to hide.

"No," he said finally. "I haven't told anyone. And you've got me all wrong." His eyes became wicked keen, fixed on my face. "You should stay away from him. He could be dangerous."

"The vampire or the fairy?" I asked before slapping myself on the forehead.

He laughed. It was a delicate, carefree sound. "Both."

My fingers curled into claws, and I squeezed them so tight my nails split skin, gouging out a chunk of my palm. My blood trickled down my wrist before my whole hand burned and the skin repaired itself, spreading over the cut. Healed, I froze and slowly raised my gaze. Devlin didn't look shocked or scared. Simply amused. He quirked an eyebrow and motioned with a sweep of his hand 'lead the way', it said.

I stared at him, waiting. He stared at me, waiting.

He broke first and did a good imitation of a long-suffering huff. I could see he was having a good time at my expense.

"Am I to keep what just happened a secret too?"

"What just happened?" I said evenly.

I felt crazy confused. It was like there was this big, obvious thing dangling in front of my face that I was too silly to see.

He stepped forward, and the stare he gave was so intense a tickle at the back of my brain made me shudder. His encroachment on my personal space was uncomfortable.

"I don't like people so close," I told him and stepped away.

Boldly, he stepped forward again and reached for my hand. "Come with me," he said softly and as an afterthought half a beat later added, "Please?"

A warning from my intuition fired in my head, and I yanked my hand away before he clasped it. “I have to get back.”

I looked over toward Bayou, conscious a demon was waiting for me, but couldn’t help but stay still, and keep trying to find that elusive obvious thing. There was something about Devlin I was missing. I just knew it. Usually, if I didn’t want to talk to someone I could ignore or drown them out, but when Devlin asked me a question I felt I had to answer. When he spoke it was like I had to listen.

“Breandan warned me away from you,” I said quietly. I backed up, wanting much, much more distance between us and watched his face for signs of falsehood. “If you were a fairy informant, why would he do that? Wouldn’t he trust you?”

“I told you had me wrong, you came to that conclusion by yourself. Regardless, trust is a complicated thing.”

“He trusted you enough to leave me here, but not enough to warn me about you.”

I struggled to understand where my thoughts were headed. It felt like I was trying to lead myself somewhere, but failing to use the clues I already knew to finish the riddle. Come on brain, do your job and work.

“Of course he would. The idea of competition for your affection will frighten him now. He’s terrified you may choose to go another way. The right way.” He gave me a quick fire grin, happy and out of place. Now I thought about it, everything about him was out of place.

Tired of standing so still, and tense, I shifted and I stumbled over my own foot. I scowled at them before remembering I had more pressing issues than my own clumsiness. My eyes darted to the dorm and back to Devlin’s face. His white-blonde hair did that weird shimmering thing and his eyes sparkled, even in the dark.

It clicked.

“No, no, no, you too,” I said, surprised and pointed at him. “You’re a demon too.”

He said nothing and that was more than answer enough for me. I reverted back to my original plan. I turned and ran.

“I didn’t want to have to do this,” he called.

The next moment he was in front of me, sighing. I stopped before I slammed into him, my arms flapping either side of me. My knees knocked together and I squeaked in alarm.

Oh gods. How could I have not seen this coming?

He moved, body blurring to close the distance between us. Crying out, I brought my hand up to ward off an attack, but he halted, and pushed against my palm until all between our bodies touching was my hand. The steady thump of his heart pounded against me and the sweet scent of his body made me dizzy. Then I felt something cool and hard pressed against my chest. There was a subtle vibration, a prickle of energy rolling outwards. A tingle ran down my body and I wiggled. Looking down, I couldn't see anything, our bodies were pressed too tightly together, but I was sure his pendant was pressed against mine through the layers of our clothes.

"Don't worry, you're safe," he said and cupped my cheek. The touch was not romantic, but somehow authoritative and belittling. "You're coming home with me. Okay? Your real home."

"No," I said so quietly it was more a squeak. I raised my voice and it was strong this time, "No."

The world spun and disappeared inch by inch the longer he was close, swallowed by the dark. He was shorter than Breandan, and I stared into his eyes without craning my neck. Fixed in place by the presence of him, the ability to move left me though the urge remained. I tried to focus on anything apart from how close he was.

"Please," I said. "Please move back. I can'tI can't think straight."

Devlin's hand trailed across my face and caused a squirm. "I can see you're confused, frightened. I can make it all go away." His hand moved down my neck and across my collarbone. His finger hooked around the leather tie that held my pendant, and pulled it up so it slipped out from under the neck of my tee, and swung between our faces. There was a wicked gleam in his eye. "All you have to do, to make it all go away is come with me. Or, give me your necklace."

"I've had it my whole life," I said and catching his hand I yanked the tie away from him. I sucked in a shaky breath. "I told you what it means to me. You can't have it."

"Don't you want everything to go back to normal?" His smile made the world dim and him bright.

I ran my eyes over him again, because he was too bright. There was something glowing and pulsing around him. I tried to move away and as I did he took hold of my head in both of his hands. They were overly warm and almost feminine, delicate. His eyes locked mine down and I stilled. Something pressed on my mind, tethered inside me.

Clasping a hand round my neck he tugged. “Give it to me,” he commanded.

I was sweating. Was I being foolish? If I gave him my necklace he said everything would go back to normal. I whimpered. I didn’t want to give it to him. It was the most important thing I owned. The only thing I had that was of any value, it was important to me. The necklace was my only connection I had to a family that had given me up at birth, and was my reminder to be strong and independent. A wrinkle of cold rolled over my skin and I shifted back, brought to by this out of place feeling. I hesitated and leaned back further, a question in my eyes. He had been doing something to me, making me forget myself.

Pushing him away, I shook with fear and anger. “What did you do to me?”

“Calm down, Rae.” He was distracted, looking around him cautiously. Then he spun and cursed, peering at nothing. He seemed to see something I could not, for a wicked smile stretched his lips. “Fool,” he sneered. “Come. Let me mark your face again.”

Chapter Five

A streak of silver light flashed past and knocked me off balance. I stumbled, blinked, and Devlin was gone. Standing alone in on the grass where he was I clucked around. Looking up, down, left and right before understanding he was gone. I was seriously considering getting my eyes checked. I freaked out in a big way; I had no doubt in my mind that Devlin was not who he said he was, And that he was up to something, a 'no good' something. I didn't know what to do. Oh gods, what was I doing? I needed a sign I was going to be okay, and that I was making the right choices. Tomas would have risen by now and would be waiting for me. And here I was looking for a Disciple, who was not really a Disciple, who knew about said vampire in wardrobe, and knew I knew a fairy.

"There you are, Rae."

"Gah!"

I jumped and landed at such an odd angle my right foot jack-knifed out painfully, and I fell. How many times was I going to land on my ass today? It was a damn good thing I didn't bruise easy.

A hand appeared in my line of sight. Unsure of what to do, I studied it intently before slowly lifting my head to look at the boy offering it to me.

Long ebony hair pulled into a ponytail, his ears were pointed at the tips and his gold eyes glowed. I had never seen anyone other than myself with such light hazel eyes before. His were striking and almond shaped, like mine. His face was all hard angles, smooth expanses of skin, and incredibly beautiful. Chest bare, his lower body was encased in leather plates intricately engraved with leaves. A sword, the length of my torso and latched to his back, triggered a shudder.

"You have nothing to fear from me." The fairies voice was warm, friendly. "My name is Conall. Breandan sent me."

Conall, I remembered the name. Breandan had said it before, I was sure of it. The fairy didn't make any other move and he seemed friendly, so I swallowed the yell I'd had ready. With my eyes darting from the hand to his face, I clasped it. He yanked me up with more force than necessary, and stumbling over my own foot, I crashed into his chest. I flushed as he clamped a hand around my shoulders, set me

away from him, and held on until my legs steadied.

“You guys think it’s okay to just pop up out of thin air. It might be normal where you come from, but I’m used to seeing people coming a good few seconds before they’re there.” Placing a hand on my hip, I clutched the other over my poor, poor heart that may give out any day. “You scared me, do you understand? I don’t like it.”

He bowed, arm coming across his torso to rest upon his chest. He moved with effortless grace and predatory bearing. A demon. He smiled at me. “It won’t happen again. Do not be alarmed, but I sense something, odd.” His hands seemed to feel something out in the air in front of me, pushing at it thoughtfully. A crease appeared above his brows in the middle of his forehead. “Its power pulls at my nature then resists contact.”

It seemed wise to keep quiet. Maybe I also should have told him I didn’t like ambiguous statements.

I filed the phrase away for later and instead took my cue from Conall. His face became grave, so my face became grave. The fairies jumped from one emotion to the other so swiftly it was hard to keep up naturally. I had decided to play monkey see, monkey do. He gazed at me silently for so long, I became uncomfortable. I don’t think I would ever master the blink-less stare these demons seemed to be so good at.

“You seem stressed,” he said.

“Conall, I’ve had a hell of a day and you seem to be gearing up to let me in on big demon secrets, but I’ve got to be honest with you, now is not a good time.”

I backed away. I was halfway back to Bayou and it was full dark. I didn’t feel any danger from Conall, but I was worried about what Tomas would do if he remained in my room much longer. What if he got hungry? I had to get him out of the Temple as soon as I could. I didn’t know what the hell had happened to Devlin, but I was guessing the silver streak was Breandan. If Devlin got away from him he might tell the Clerics I had a vampire in my wardrobe. I had stuff to do, and surely whatever this fairy had to tell could wait a few hours.

“This cannot wait. Breandan would show you himself, but he thought it was better in the long run if I am the one to show you. I must help you adjust to your true form and help you with your first conjuring, or it could end badly.”

I frowned at him. Then I frowned over my shoulder where the silver streak had disappeared. “That was Breandan then.”

He nodded. “You came close to being lost to us.” Pausing, his eyes flicked to me then swiveled around the compound as the corners of his mouth pulled down. “You must be careful who you’re alone with.”

He walked off prompting me to follow.

“Uh, where are we going?”

The fairy strolled along unconcerned but I glanced around, worried. There had been many strange occurrences connected to me, and I was becoming more noticeable. For someone used to living under the radar it was unsettling. I didn’t want to draw any more attention to myself, but I couldn’t just let him wander around the Temple.

“I really do have something important to do,” I added after a beat since he didn’t answer. “Breandan said he was going to come back, so I don’t think it’d be too big of a deal just waiting until later.”

“He’s dealing with Devlin,” Conall said. “I’m to protect and guide you to the white witch and he’ll meet us as soon as he can.”

A pickle of fear seized me all over. “Witch?” I said sharply. “Witches are bad, and we are going to go visit one?”

“She is someone who will help you to understand what is happening.”

“Huh. Why didn’t Breandan send someone else after Devlin?” In my head I appended the sentence with, like you.

He heard the unspoken and slid a sly look my way. “They both want something only you can give, and you can only give it to one of them. Devlin is as cunning as Breandan is frank. He needed to deal with it personally.”

“I’m not on the market, nor is anything I own.” I pressed a hand over my chest were my pendant lay. Now Conall had given me the heads up I would not be letting it out of my sight. Not that it had ever left my neck in the last eighteen years.

“Being difficult won’t help you in the long run. Stop trying to reason as a human would. You are not one and you’re not built like one. Your body and mind can handle much more. Soon, you will learn this. You will learn there are rules that must be observed and respected.”

I ground my teeth together. “You’re making assumptions. I have respect, and I just know, no matter what anybody says I am not giving this necklace up.”

I had decided the moment I met him I’d be safe with him, but I was anxious of what was coming next. Feeling foolish, I tapped him lightly on the shoulder. He looked a question at me and I waved him closer. He leaned down from his lofty height to peer into my face quizzically. “I’ve figured out you guys can jump really high, but I can’t. I can’t jump over the Temple wall.” Stepping away I shrugged to show nonchalance, but reddened. At a moment like this Tomas would have come in handy. He had jumped it in a single bound. “We can’t go out the gate either. I don’t even want to think how I would explain you.”

He gave me a warm smile and I immediately felt at ease, grinning back. “Don’t fret,” he said. “It’ll take time for you to learn what you can and cannot do.”

Without breaking stride he took my upper arm and jumped. We passed high over the wall then fell. Conall’s feet hit the ground and I was left dangling from the floor at an awkward angle. He carefully set me down and continued walking. To my credit I didn’t freak. I’d done the stunt before, and I was practically a veteran.

The sun had begun to set and the sky was sapphire, contrasting beautifully with the green of the treetops. We reached the Wall and Conall stopped, to stare hard at the buzzing wires, red hot with electric current.

“You’re doing what Breandan did last time? To the Wall, I mean.” Babbling beside him I straightened my clothes. “You somehow stop the current without tripping the klaxon. I think I’ve done it before, by accident.”

“Could you be quiet for a moment?”

Another blush crept up my neck. “Okay, shutting up now.”

“It’s done. In answer to your question, yes.” Conall pointed to a small man sized hole now in the Wall, moved through it and disappeared into the trees.

Biting my lip, I climbed through and stumbled after him. As we moved I entwined my hands in the coarse grass swaying about my waist. Tugging a few clumps free of the earth, I ran my fingertips over the petals of a wild flower that tickled my palm. The thrumming of

crickets and rustle of life in the undergrowth made me smile. The air, heavy with the scent of soil, felt alive as we basked.

Conall breathed in deeply. A satisfied smile danced on the edge of his mouth.

“Do you know how drop your glamour?”

“No.” I slid up my hood.

Standing legs apart, his hands came to rest on his narrow hips. “You understand the physical of your nature?”

I let the clumps of grass fall and wiped my hands on my jeans. “I’m fast. I heal.”

“Have you measured your strength?”

Disconcerted, I rubbed my nose. I hadn’t thought of what being a fairy really entailed. I knew that they were fierce and hard. They healed fast and were the most powerful of the demons. They had strong characters and were beautiful. They had buckets of pride and protected what they thought was theirs. They had magic. I was one of them. But what did it mean to be a fairy? Was there a pecking order like there was within the Sect and who protected, and guided them? Did they really live as nomads and in small families by choice? Or was it a result of the Rupture, like the Wall was.

“I haven’t thought about it. I haven’t thought about much to be honest. Stuff keeps happening a tad fast.”

“If I was human,” he snorted, “and discovered I was much stronger, faster I would not be able to stop myself.” He shrugged. “My nature is proud.”

I thought on it for a while. “It’s hard to believe all of this. You all seem so real.” Conall gave me an odd look. “Understand, in my world demons are odd not humans.”

“A complicated way of saying you’re adjusting.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and placing my legs a foot apart, bent my knees like I was to do some damage. Balling my hands into fists, I pushed thought to the back of my head to clear up some thinking space.

“I’m ready. Let’s do this.” The sooner I got this done, the sooner I could get back to Tomas.

“You know you’re fast?” I bobbed my head. He grinned, a slash of white against the dark tan of his skin. “When the spell broke how did you feel?”

There was that buzz word again. Spell. Breandan had mentioned a spell breaking and something being painful. My heart picked up. Was this going to be painful? Is that the real reason why Breandan wanted this fairy to show me instead of him? I realized Conall was waiting for my answer.

“Uh” I thought back to running away from the Clerics, their dogs chasing me down; believing I was about to be ripped to pieces by teeth. “Scared.”

His brows pulled together. “Scared? Not a strong emotion, and certainly not strong enough to break a spell.”

“I was completely bricking myself.”

I watched as he translated that into something he could understand. “Better,” he concluded and looked at me hard. “Before the speed what was your state of mind?”

I hopped from one foot to the other. “Did you not hear me? I was terrified. I wanted nothing more than to be far, far away from an ugly painful death.”

“Precisely. Your state of mind is crucial when conjuring. Glamour is no different.”

“Ah, no incantations over a cauldron bubbling with chicken feet and grave dirt?”

I had a flash of myself doing a tribal dance in front of an open flame with mud on my face, an animal fur slung about my naughty bits. and bones plaited into my hair. I muffled a snigger.

“If you are a witch laying a spell to hide than yes, but not fairy glamour. It is done with little concentration. Eventually you’ll conjure and drop your glamour with ease. When we glamour ourselves we suppress our nature. This cloaks our ears and makes us less otherworldly by fixing our features to one state. A safeguard is created around our being. Once sight passes through it makes us look more

human. We dislike when people are in our," he pursed his lips, "the humans call it personal space unless they have a close connection to us."

I struggled to understand. "So, the ears and the glowing still exist but we just can see it?"

"The glamour disrupts what the mind perceives to be true. If you cannot see, smell, touch or hear a thing why would you believe it is there?"

I remembered the shield over Breandan, the pulsing around Devlin. "As fairies we can sense glamour." I said and nodded.

I had definitely gotten it wrong. Devlin wasn't human at all. He was a fairy, a fairy hiding in plain sight at Temple. How he had managed such a thing was beyond me. To enroll you have to meet the Priests and take a vow to uphold Sect Doctrine.

"I think I'm there, but what do you mean about fixing ourselves in one state?"

"You notice how in fairy form we are severe one moment then jovial in another." I tilted my head to signal yes, and remembered Breandan's crazy mood swings. "This is because of the depth of our temperament. Suppressing the fairy nature helps us blend. The drawback is you are slower, weaker. Your senses are dampened as is control over magic. Our power comes from the Source of course, and it is vast and limitless. It is energy. Energy lives in all things, constantly evolving and blending into something new. Fairies have the strongest natural awareness of the forces surrounding us and can draw from the Source, manipulate its power for our needs. The majority of us think of it in broad strokes. It makes for easy focus and quick action."

"Source?" I grinned like a loon. "You mean you're going to show me magic."

He nodded manically, feeding off my enthusiasm. "The most simplistic way to conjure is to seek the power surrounding you, reach out to it and summon whilst channeling the energy. Watch me."

A pinball of light appeared overhead, bloating to become a small ball of fire. It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen, cooler than seeing purple in the dark or bouncing over walls. Suddenly it was there, like it always had been my whole life. Like falling out a window as a child

and not having a scratch on you. Like dropping a full cup of water and it landing right-side-up without spilling a drop. Like making a hole in the Wall without tripping the klaxon. My whole life the strange things that happened around me had been attributed to freaky good luck since I couldn't be a witch. None of it was under my voluntary control, and never did I really gain anything. But now it all lined up in perfect order. The power was in my reach and mine for the taking.

Something pulsed close by, a mini sun of colour and heat that seemed to be nowhere and everywhere. Instinctively I drew from its warmth. It was like turning the faucet of an unexpectedly high-pressured tap. The flow of energy flooded into me, and spilled over the lip of who I was. To save myself drowning or burning up I changed the feeling into a thing. Fire. A ball of flame exploded into existence, hurtling toward us. I watched the self made instrument of my rapidly advancing death in awe.

An urgent sound muttered from Conall cut over the oncoming hiss, and just before impact, the fireball imploded. It left nothing but a ringing in my ears, white spots across my vision and enough heat to singe a few strands of my hair.

Conall's ball of fire hovered mockingly above.

"That was not as good as I thought it'd be," I said faintly.

Conall's pupils were huge with shock and his pointed ears twitched. His face was stark white. He released the white-knuckled hold on my upper arms and eased himself away. He'd thrown himself at me and lurched into an odd crouch when the fireball was coming our way, ready to drag me out the way if needed.

"Why do you perceive a giant ball of death coming toward you as a good thing?"

I ignored him. "You call the energy to you then you make it into what you want in your head?"

"In a basic way, yes." His voice returned to normal and the repressed panic in his eyes ebbed away. "You must give yourself time to focus on what you want to achieve." The looked leveled my way was laced with warning. "The greater the focus the more effective the spell. It comes packing a punch."

"More of a punch than the fire ball?"

“Yes,” he said wary. “We will leave further conjuring to another time. Agreed?”

I gave a thumb up. “Anything else I should know?”

“Our bodies are conductors. We can control as much energy as our body can withstand to channel, never more.”

“I can’t get better?”

“You can become proficient so spells are more effective and you can access as much energy as possible but in terms of measurable power, no.”

“How do you know when you’re at the limit?”

“Trial and error.” His voice had gone flat and the warning his eyes told me in no uncertain terms should he catch me being silly I’d be in major trouble.

“I’ll be careful,” I promised.

The breeze, lightly scented with lavender and periwinkle, caressed my heated skin. I was distracted by a random thought. I plucked at my sleeve behind my back, and decided to just throw it out there.

“Conall, you’re a boy.” I burrowed the toe of my boot into the undergrowth. “Am I nice looking? For a fairy, I mean.”

“You are beautiful.”

“You have to say that because Breandan will hurt you if you upset me.”

“No,” he said softly. “I admit I take his wishes into consideration when I speak to you, but my thoughts and opinions remain my own.” His eyes roamed my face.

“You have never seen yourself without glamour. And I have.”

I searched his face. I had never been slightly curious about my past. I figured if my family had been willing to give me up they weren’t worth my time. My necklace was my only connection to them, and it was the only connection I needed. At least, that was how I felt up until that morning. Learning I was a demon had changed a few things. Maybe I needed to re think the whole ‘my family suck and I hate them’ thing.

“You have?”

“When you were a baby.”

It took a while for me to be able to speak. “You knew me?” I asked. “I mean, you know me?”

His face had clouded, voice lowered. “Yes.”

“I get the feeling you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Yes.”

“Okay then,” I said slowly. It would do no good to push him. Besides, I was in no hurry to find out, and I was not sure if I was ready to hear what he might say. “Another time then. So, this glamour thing, I need to focus on nothing but stripping it away, right?”

“The spell was broken the first time you tapped into your nature. I’m sure of this. Breandan told me what happened this morning.” The uncomfortable moment had passed, and his lips curved. “I have never heard of a fairy fainting before.”

I gaped at him in horror. “He did not tell you that. I did not faint. I did not!”

“Of course.” His voice was serious, but the smile was still there. “Remove your glamour.”

I just loved how he said it like I already knew how. No pressure or anything. Taking a deep breath I cleared my mind. Emptying my head of the confusion over Devlin took moments and was easy. Clearing out thoughts of Breandan was hard. Memories of his hands on my body, lips on my skin were electrifying. The eyes that turned me inside out, and the smiles that dazzled took considerably longer to purge. Confusingly, the thoughts of my vampire-boy were also hard to shake. Tomas’s face kept popping into view every time I managed to get the thoughts of Breandan under some kind of control.

Achieving oneness I relaxed into a trance, and for time unknown I simply, was. As my consciousness floated I noticed a pulsing deep within me. I strained to touch it. Each time I thought I had a hold it slipped through my fingers. I tried again, and again, and began to feel sad; the pulsing glow looked beautiful and special. I had drawn from the Source easy enough before, why was it causing me trouble now? I reached and wished it in my palm, pleading meekly. Nothing. Oh for

gods sake! The glow zapped into me and overflowed from my body to spill my aura into the air. A feeling of bliss trilled inside me as layers of the lie tore one by one. My true self clawed its way out.

A drowning woman breaching the surface, gasping for air, my nature broke free of containment and ran riot through my body in a frenzied burst.

My first urge was to run to a presence far to the north. A siren song my entire being hummed with wanting. So strong was the call, I teetered on my toes and forcibly pulled myself back to straight. I became conscious to the why the presence felt familiar. Breandan. Unable to make it go away, I ignored the need and focused on everything else.

I moved, and my skin stung as if a layer had been stripped with a knife. There was a heavy pressure at the bottom of my spine, and something soft thumped hard at my back, pressing against my top. A larger, burning pain gripped my shoulders in a vice until my back arched. Stifled, my back was stifled. Stomach muscles clenching my whole body quivered under the pain centering between my shoulder blades. The fabric of my top gave way and I surged forward at the force of the thrust from behind me. The pain in my shoulders was gone, but the awareness of more was overwhelming. Craning my head to look round my body followed until I was doing a crazy spin.

“Wings,” I choked as the golden tips extended to flutter into my line of sight. I blinked at my own voice, a resonating sound of chinking crystals. That was me talking?

Conall was beside me, holding me up. “Pull yourself together,” he said.

I held onto the sound of his voice, held on to his stern command. If he had molly-cuddled me, I’d have curled into a ball and cried. His matter of fact outlook kept me grounded. I tried to block out everything but that close to me. My body responded immediately and every sensation collapsed on itself.

“Oh,” I gasped and took another steadying breath.

Conall took out a knife, grabbed my shoulder and with a swift jerk cut a hole in my jeans. Slipping his fingertip through the hole, he pulled something through and springing free it thumped against the back of my thigh. I spun, and tried to catch the thick length of skin protruding from the base of my spine. Each extra vertebra was under my control

right to the tip. I focused on the extra limb and it curled to hover by my waist. I clasped it and gasped. It was warm, soft and I stared dumbfounded at the hard, leaf like tip. It felt strong. The skin was the same colour as my flesh, but as it tapered the colour got lighter. Looking down at my tail, I noticed my nails had lengthened and thickened into talons. I bit my lip and sharp points of pain had me tasting my own blood. I ran my tongue over my teeth, less like teeth now and more like fangs. My bottom lip throbbed as it healed. Then I focused on the heavy weight behind me. The two limbs curved away from my body and looked like the wings of a dragonfly. Blood pumped through the veins and goose bumps appeared in the absence of sun. My wings twitched. How the wind feels through your hair, such it felt as a gust passed over and under my wings. The instinct came to me and they twitched again. They spread, out and out, until I saw the great length of them either side of me. They beat once, slowly, then again and again. Tremendous power trilled through me and I leant my strength into the limbs attached to my back. They beat once more and my heels lifted off the ground. Shocked, I stopped and dropped back down to the floor panting from the exertion.

I couldn't smile or cry or whimper.

And so I screamed.

Something stung my cheek and my scream cut off. Conall drew back his palm. but this time I caught his hand and held it. "I didn't think it would be such a shock. Perhaps we should have done this differently. Breandan will be furious." Conall frowned. "I want my hand back?"

I let him go, and instead held my hand out in front of me, fisted. I felt my tail doing some odd twisting thing and found to hard to keep my balance. Once I'd figured out how to hold it straight, I felt invincible. My wings curled behind me to rest snugly against my back and I rolled my shoulders. Flexing my toes in my boots, I wiggled my fingers as my tail curled round my legs. The tip occasionally brushed the floor.

"You should know wings are not gifted to all our kind and are great honor. You cannot fly, but you can glide. The tail will help with your speed and balance." His head snapped to peer into the forest. "Breandan is to the-"

"Northeast," I offered with certainty. It was weird because like a lens focusing, I could sense Breandan. I knew the direction he was in and how long it would take me to reach him. Taking a step away from

where he was, my body resisted and fought to go the other way.

The fairy clapped his hands together beaming. “We’ve got time. What shall we do?”

I felt amazing, like nothing could end me. Untouchable. I knew I was fast, I knew my senses kicked ass. How strong was I now? I glanced at the trees.

“You asked if I had tested my strength”

Conall’s hands flew to his hips as his head rolled back. Ponytail swinging wildly his laughter boomed. “You are delightful. You may throw me.” His hand swept over the forest.

My jaw hit the floor. “I can’t throw you.” I deliberately narrowed my eyes. “Are you yanking my chain?”

“Such a pretty chain, but I’m not yanking it. Yes, you can throw me. I’ll not be harmed.”

“Really not worrying about you.”

Squaring my shoulders I strutted over to him. I did ask for it. Placing my hands on his arms I tested my internal body function calculator. Well hey, I felt pretty damn strong. I peeked at Conall’s face for courage and to check he wasn’t making fun. He grinned down at me with all the confidence in the world.

Bending my knees, I gripped his arms tight and braced myself. Lift, twist and hurl. The action was so quick I barely saw my arms move. Conall shot over the trees like a black comet, and was lost to sight in seconds. Hands covering my mouth, I bounced on the spot in horror. My ears stretched back then I took off. I ghosted through the trees at speed with no fear of harm, franticly burning across the rugged terrain. Through the awning of leaves my eyes spotted him falling. As I drew closer he gracefully straightened out, soaring back to the earth pencil straight before curling his body into a summersault. In a move of power and grace his feet touched down on the forest floor with an ear splitting boom.

The ground shook; air rippled out and tossed fallen leaves. Conall was crouched, one fist and knee on the ground, in a dirt hole. The earth looked freshly tilled where it had been forced to make way for him. He sprung up laughing, and dusted himself off.

I slammed to a stop beside him, and for a moment my body screamed at me to keep going. I was closer to Breandan. If I kept running and I would be at his side. Focusing on the fairy in front of me, I rushed to apologize.

“I didn’t realize.” Breathy with panic my tail thumped my shoulder repeatedly. “Forgive me. Are you right?”

My hands flittered around him and he caught one to kiss it.

“I am proud,” he said bowed over my hand. “You will be glorious. I’m not heavy, but it was a good demonstration nonetheless. There has not been a female fairy with a talent in strength for such a long time.” Conall sounded delighted. “But then you will be talented in most things.” He released my hand and tapped me on the nose.

I blinked at the playful gesture. “It was easy, like throwing a ball. Gods, I’m wicked strong.”

“I wait bated to see your castings.”

My face crumpled. Magic was not something I suspected would come easily to me. “It’ll be a while before I can control calling on the Source, and getting it to do what I want rather than whatever stray thought is passing through my mind.”

“Aptitude will come quickly or not at all, such is the way of it.”

“You said I’m strong for a female. Is there anything else I could try?”

“You’re eager.” Conall shook a little dust off, an efficient brush of his shoulder with an eloquent hand. “Every fairy is unique, and it will take time for you to learn your skills.”

“I’m curious, what skills do you have?”

He walked off into the trees. “You ask many questions,” he said matter of fact and jumped over a huge boulder roughly my height.

I eyed it, my healthy competitive nature goading me on. Sense caught up me and I walked around it. Conall waited patiently on the other side, and once he was visible continued walking.

I realized we had been travelling for an awful long time and that the forest had changed. It was sparser, and the trees swept down into a bowl shape with the land. The leaves had broadened and become

darker, just as the trunks had become thinner and lighter. As the day drew to a close my eyes adjusted, and the world tinted to purple and blue again. My sensitive nose and ears picked up lingering trails, the snuffling of smaller mammals.

My senses stretched and I honed onto something, different. The 'being' sensed me touch her mind and nudged me away. She was of the two natured, a canine shifter of some kind. Startled, I scrambled back into myself. It was a shock. I knew of course there would be other demons Outside, this was their territory. But still, I was shocked. I sought the comfort of the familiar.

"Breandan," I murmured. I knew he was near but not in my line of sight or range of hearing.

"Yes, he is close." Conall was beside me. He'd stopped walking as I skipped on. "He'll meet us here." He motioned with his hand for me to continue walking.

I pushed a hand through my crazy hair and stepped forward. Entering the glade I saw a colossal building. Grey stone with marble statues adorned each corner and flanking the entrance. The slated roof was thatched, golden and half caved in. Trees and flowers sprouted on the ground inside, this I saw through the large glassless windows.

"Witch." Conall called and pumped his hand cheerfully.

"Hai, Rae?" a sunny voice called across the clearing.

I gawped at the blonde, blue-eyed cherub standing in the building entrance. Her hair was plaited into a messy braid, and she wore a plain blue tunic, and soft brown boots. She looked like an upper dwell. She grinned at me like we were the best of friends, and waved me forward.

Skipping ahead, she yapped over her shoulder. "I'm Ana or the white witch if you want to be formal about it." She shot a sour look at Conall.

I followed after her, totally bewildered by her and my surroundings. The building was solemn, and as I walked through the bold entrance pillars - fairy mouths open in silent scream - I wondered of its significance.

"What is this place?" I asked.

“A church. An old and secret place,” Conall replied from behind me.

The plant life from outside spilled in through the windows, and ivy snaked its way up the walls, clinging to the grey stone in wild patches. Rows and rows of large stone steps circled the room. Seats? The building foundation was naturally steeped into the dirt, growing from the earth itself. My feet stepped springy, damp moss and crunchy thick grass mixed with flowered weeds.

“I like your eyes,” she declared. “Your family always did have the most beautiful gold eyes.” The witch-girl had an innocent, pixie like face and curly blonde hair. She waved her hands up and down my body critically. “You’re meeting me in your true form. That is a good omen. Sometimes you come to me still disguised as human and what I have to say never goes down well.”

“As long as you don’t tell me what to do,” I said and gazed at the buckled roof, “we’ll get along just fine.”

Ana smacked her forehead then clicked her fingers into points and nodded. “Sorry, I get confused somewhat when I meet new people. It takes a while to fit them into the bigger picture. The Sight gives me glimpses of possible futures, and you’re radiating images like a beacon whacked up to max. It’ll be easier for me once I’ve done a proper reading on you. The roads of your future will be clearer and we can-” She spaced out, her eyes flickered at something unseen. “Oooh, that is not good. Tell your blonde friend not to go outside on her own in the dark. In most futures it ends badly.”

“Huh?” I croaked feeling a million miles behind.

“I’m trying to get a feel for where we are time wise,” she enlightened. Her tiny palms flew up. “Wait. Has that vampire bitten you yet? You should have met him by now.” She frowned and looked inward. “I’m missing something.”

My heart thumped. She could only be talking about Tomas. I was hyper aware of Conall standing alert beside me at the mention of a vampire. I twisted my hands into my jumper pockets. “Uh, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Maybe if you never meet him you won’t end up at Orchard. That’s a relief. I did a reading on Breandan, and he ends up there in chains. He gets distracted because the vampire wants you.” She frowned. “No wait, I think it’s a humans fault. Damn, I can’t see. Anyway, things get out of control. You know how vampires are once they’ve had your

blood. Bottom line is in this future you all died. Sometimes you save him but not the vampire. Or you save the vampire and the human but not Breandan. I can't see what the difference is between one future and the other. My advice is to avoid Orchard if you can."

"Say-so," I said. Not that I'd ever had any plans to be in the company of Tomas for much longer or ever visit this Orchard place. "Y'know what, I'm going to be honest and say I have no idea what to do with anything you just said. I've seen and done unreal stuff today." Sensing its queue my tail whiplashed out behind me. "Nothing is simple anymore and everything frightens me. And you. Your supposed to be a witch and evil by default. You aren't what I expected."

"Old woman with a hunch back, raspy cackle and a pimple on her nose?" She asked in a bored voice. "Cauldron and a cave?" I nodded guiltily. "Damn. Stereotyping is a bitch. Yes, witches are bad, but I'm the exception to the rule." She stepped toward me and I stepped back, wary. She extended her hand and I eyed it warily. "Let's get this done. Sorry to disappoint, but I don't peer into your palm and trace lines. Hold my hand, I won't bite."

Taking a deep breath, I reached out and clasped the undersized hand in mine. Ana's pupils dilated into coin-sized black holes, swallowing the whites of her eyes. The skin on my fingers started to tingle.

"Incredible," she breathed.

Her body became motionless, and her eyes hooded. They flickered rapidly trying to watch a million things at once. My hand grew hot and she gripped me tighter. I flinched to pull away, but she held on, astonishingly strong. She shrieked, a loud, short sound of pain and denial. A pulse of energy shot down my arm, and my hand was wrenched from hers. We staggered back in shock of the connection being broken, and I curled in on myself, blowing on my heated palm.

Ana face was clouded with indecision. "Oh Rae, what have you done," she whispered.

Conall had a big question in his voice, "What have you seen?"

Ana said nothing, but watched me absorbedly. "Could you give us some space?"

He hesitated, but then nodded. Releasing me he blurred into a sprint and rocketed out of sight. Again, it seemed demons were not big on goodbyes. After a few seconds deep silence, I fidgeted at how intense

Ana had become. My eyes darted to and from her gaze that never wavered from its mark.

“Rae, you have many futures but two are clear. You stand at a precipice and I’m telling you, for your own sake you need to step back.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” I made a helpless gesture.

“The vampire, I see him in your future. He hails the end of people you care about and those you have not yet met. Hear me.” Ana stepped forward, hand outstretched and face anguished. “You must stop what you’re doing. Turn away from that future. Plain enough for you?”

Understanding came to me then, and a name slipped through my parted lips. “Tomas.”

She paled to gray. “I warned Breandan he would seek you out. I thought he was deflected. They’ve been hunting him for nearly a month now.” She swallowed, her unsteady breathing plainly revealing her angst. “You must stay away from him. He is bad news,” she said. “You have no idea what he is capable of. If he gets a hold on you we will be lost.”

“You don’t have to worry.” I tired to sound calm and reassuring because she was freaking out. Her face was all red and her hands waved about in the air frantically. “He’s okay. He just wants to talk. I’ll hear him out and then he’ll go.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you? That a vampire has risked his life to come and tell you something then run away into the night and leave you be?”

I flushed. It did sound improbable that Tomas would want to tell me something then leave, but what else could he want?

“You have to tell me what’s going on.”

Ana did not answer. Instead she drew herself up and was glaring at me again.

“There was a decision I did not understand, but now I see.” A sound of frustration gurgled in the back of her throat. “I will not look further down that road, it is a disaster. If you keep this secret about Maeve for much longer, it’ll be the beginning of the end. Breandan may seem cold at times, but he needs to be able to trust you. It is my purpose to

reveal what counts, but if I tell him Maeve may be If I tell him everything falls apart." I said and did nothing. I stood and stared at nothing, because once again I hadn't a clue what was going on. Ana cocked her head. "He hasn't explained anything to you, has he?"

"We only met this morning and he's been busy hunting Tomas."

Who I'm hiding in my wardrobe, I added silently. Realizing I'd rallied to Breandan's defense, I pressed my lips together.

Exasperated, a hand flew to her hips, and she tutted. "Lochlann, Breandan's older brother is the leader of a group of fairies who have broken away from Devlin's rule, and therefore the Tribe. Rebels."

My mouth flapped open. "What?" I spluttered. "Fairies have Tribes?"

Ana yawned, rubbed at her ear. "There is only one Tribe, the Tribe, ruled over by the fairy High Lord, Devlin. Lochlann is a lord too, from one of the older families. After disagreeing with Devlin about" Her eyes flicked back to me, and she dropped the ends of her sentence. "He took his family and a few others with him. Then he left a month ago, and didn't say why or where he was going. He just left us." Her shoulders jerked once. "Some panicked and started to lose faith. A few even went back to Devlin."

Shaking my head, I caught up, and frowned. "Breandan took his place?"

She went pink and scowled at the floor. "He was as confused as the rest of us. Lochlann is not weak or fickle. He had a reason for leaving, but it's hard to keep faith in such times as these. Breandan and Maeve had their own private battle as to what should be done to lead the others until he returned. But neither of them said anything directly to Lochlann's followers to soothe them. Once, when it was really bad, I touched Breandan trying to get his attention, and I saw his future." She sighed and rubbed her head. "Before I thought it through I blurted it all out. Naturally the rebels turned to him to lead."

"What did you see?"

"Breandan standing over Devlin, victorious with a fairy-girl stood beside him. I saw alternates of course, but when the fairy was gone Breandan failed and died. Lochlann comes back to his brother's body and turns his back on us."

Of course I was going to ask, "So, who's the fairy-girl?"

“Seriously? I have to answer that question?”

Pressing a hand to my throat, I searched for the invisible fingers crushing it. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I saw you and Breandan running hand in hand behind the Wall. You wore the green blazer with the Sect sigil. Oh, the fact you are training to be a Cleric went down a treat with the rebels, by the way.” She sighed. “Damn that boy, I’d kick his ass if I didn’t owe him. He played such a dangerous game.”

I sunk to my knees amongst the leaves and settled down onto my bum, legs flopping weakly in front of me. My hands burrowed into the dry dirt either side of me, and fisted beneath the surface.

“What game? How is any of this a game?”

“Wrong choice of words.” She waved her hands in apology. “Breandan sought you out, no matter how much he may try to deny it. The moment I told him what I saw, he wanted to see you, but it’s screwed things up. I always saw you bumping into each other and your love growing. I told him to stay away, that the time for your meeting would happen naturally. Then I found out he was spying on you for the last month.” She smiled. “This morning when you saw him, by the slope before you fell, he didn’t help you up because I called him away. You were not supposed to meet like that. But when you got lost the future changed again, and in pops the vampires chance.” She grimaced and looked down at her hands. “But I guess, it’s my own fault for blurting out the truth.”

“A few things are starting to make sense,” I said, and breathless, lifted a finger to signal time out.

I thought of how Breandan reacted toward me the first time we’d met. He’d been horrified at who I was, annoyed at me, and yet so persistent. Always coming back no matter how many times I told him to back off, so sure that I had to listen and trust him. My wings curled around me, and my tail flicked about behind me disturbing stone and insect. It was daunting to hear someone you had just met and were beginning to feel something for had known you, and what you would become a long time before you knew they existed.

“And Devlin? How did he find out? I doubt Breandan would have proclaimed my existence to the Tribe.” I remembered the reluctance in his expression when he held me for the first time. And I remembered his words, the white witch was right and now I’ll never hear the end

of it. “And as much as you tell me he wanted me meet me; I have a hard time believing it.”

Ana pulled her top up and I recoiled. The skin across her stomach was a ghastly sight of lumpy flesh and pink scars. “The Tribe caught me and I was not strong enough to hold my tongue.” Pulling the top back down a tear rolled down her cheek. Scrubbing it away she looked disgusted at herself for showing weakness. “Breandan saved me, and carried me to Conall for healing. But the cuts were done with magic, and Devlin’s consort, Wasp,” she spat the name, “is a tricky bitch with a special gift for knife work.”

I yanked my hair a few times, the feeling of helplessness threatening to overwhelm me. “Only you’ve foretold this showdown between Breandan, Devlin and me?”

“There has been no one with such a strong gift of Sight in a long time. I’m good and my gift has yet to improve but trust me, I’m never wrong.”

“You can’t see things, say, fifty years from now?”

“That’s not how it works. I don’t see visions, I see future possibilities,” she explained wiggling her fingers and nose. “I look at you or touch you and in my head I see you taking different actions, making decisions and the future steps you take altering because of them. Like ghost images moving on top of what I see. It’s hard for me to attach time to it or remember it all. It doesn’t help I have a memory like a sieve. I judge time by appearance and significant events.” Ana’s creased face broke into a playful grin. “Sounds mental.”

“I hate to admit it, but you’re one of the sanest people I’ve met today.”

“I’m the most awesome person you’ve met.”

There was a question that pressed on my mind. I didn’t want to seem self-absorbed, but the more I ignored it the louder intuition chimed it meant something, something big and scary.

Chapter Six

“When I first met Breandan, he touched me and it feltstrange. Then he said something about us no longer having a choice. That is was sealed. And a while ago Conall said he sensed something odd. I think he was feeling thethe after effect of whatever it was.”

Ana sucked in a breath. “Ah, that surprised even me, and boy did I feel it. The disturbance slammed into me like a sledge-hammer. Others sensitive to such things would have sensed it too. The moment it happened the future shifted so dramatically it gave me a killer headache.” She turned her head and her eyes echoed her reaction to whatever future she saw moving over me. They looked haunted. “But it does explain why you and Breandan coming together is so important. The connection itself, well, it’s happened once before and it didn’t end well.” I threaded my fingers through the grass at my side and waited. Ana focused hard on my face then looked away. “You must avoid speaking of it, Rae. Don’t tell anyone,” she said in a rush. “There are those who will not accept.”

The sudden urgency threw me, and I leaned up. “Why? And don’t evade the question.”

She saw my surly expression and sighed. “In the end they died and they took thousands of fairy lives with them.” The curiosity in my face prompted her to continue. “The word you’re looking for to explain what you feel is a nexus. When you touch something is created between you and Breandan that is unbreakable, untouchable. It grows. The longer you are apart the greater the need for contact with him will become. When you do touch it will be likelike a direct tap to the Source. The longer you are apart the greater the, ah, release of energy will be.”

By the scared look on her face, I don’t think the big release of energy was a good thing. The larger implications of what she was saying sunk in and burned a hole.

“What if I don’t want to be tied to him?”

“It’s done now.”

“But, I-, I still don’t even know what it means.”

“Bonded ones can never rule or lead because they end up too wrapped

in each other to think or see straight."

"That's not what I meant. What does it mean in real terms? Like does it mean Breandan and I are destined to be together?"

The idea was so clich&#65533; it was gross, but it was one I understood easily.

"How the hell would I know?" I shot her a look. "Oh, you're forgetting what I can and can't do again. I can tell you if you'll turn right down a fork in the road instead of left, but I can't tell you why you chose that direction." She paused thoughtfully. "Unless say, the right was blocked and you had to go left. See what I mean?"

With a tremble, I digested what I had learned. Breandan and I were tied together by an unbreakable magical bond, for life. And I wasn't even sure I liked him.

"Does Breandan know?" I asked.

"After you met the first time I saw what would happen should it grow beyond control. I warned him to stay close and to touch you skin to skin as often as he could." She grinned. "I don't think he minded the instruction once he'd met you."

"I don't understand. We can connect to the Source. Big deal. You can touch the Source."

"This is more complex than a simple channeling of power. When the nexus opens you become a living embodiment of the energy in its raw form. A Source in your own right."

I frowned and chewed my lip. "Sounds intense."

She barked a laugh and rubbed at her eyes. "You have no idea."

I sensed her close up on the subject and thought of something else. "Why does Devlin want me to go with him? He seemed very insistent that I go home with him."

"This is where it gets complicated. Has Breandan or Conall explained the limits of the Source yet?"

"I can get better at wielding magic with practice, but can never draw more than my limit." I said, proud of myself for remembering.

"Clever girl, but for you and Breandan the rule no longer applies.

You're bonded."

"Oh," I said, neatly put in my place. "I see."

Ana gazed above and her face was frightened. "There are three ancient items of magic in the form of golden amulets pure fairies - Priestesses, whose purpose is to keep the balance of life - can wield to make themselves extremely powerful, and become more connected to the Source. For nearly two thousand years the balance was maintained. But then one Priestess forgot her purpose, and it got out of whack. The dark outweighed the light, and things that never should have been possible occurred." Her face took on a sour look. "The Rupture was a side effect of her failure. If she was doing job and keeping the balance, it never would have happened. The vampires would have been stopped. But the result of that failure is clear to see, look at the world we live in."

"You're looking for these amulets," I said, "to try and bring back the balance. But Devlin has other plans. It's like a race."

She nodded. "A bloody sprint to see who can amass the most power before inevitable war. The grimoire, a book of spells has been in the Tribe's possession since before anyone can remember. It would be horrific if a force of evil was able to open it." She shuddered delicately in the grass. "The grimoire is locked, and the key is the three amulets combined, wielded by a pure fairy."

"Why are you guys so worried then? If you have to be pure to-"

"It doesn't matter which type of pure you are. Pure evil can unlock the book just as pure good can."

"Who's the dumbass thought that gem up?"

"You did. Rather, one of your past reincarnations did."

"Ah," I said.

"Breandan lost an amulet piece this morning. It gives protection to the possessor." She smiled at a spider scuttling across her leg. She picked it up and held it in her palm, moved her hand this way and that as the hairy brown arachnid searched for a place to get off. "Its guardian gave it to him for safekeeping as he felt he could no longer conceal it."

The implications of what she was saying hit home. "So, the Tribe now has one amulet, and the rebels have-"

“Officially, none,” she said and grimaced. “Lochlann will not forgive Breandan easily for that screw up. He became its protector, and left it unprotected to run around after you since you got lost. Like I said before, I’ve saw that sticky spot you slid into with Maeve.”

I scowled darkly. Everyone sounded so ready to bend over and take it from this fairy Lochlann, but I didn’t see him risking his hide to guard the amulet piece. Where was he? He was needed here.

Ana set the spider on the grass, and waved goodbye as it scurried away into the undergrowth.

“Rae, the next time we hear strange noises in the forest, what do we do?

“Go the other way,” I mumbled.

“Correct.” She beamed at me. “Don’t worry, all is not lost. We can even the score. There are two more, hidden with their guardians and we’ll find them, just you watch.”

I let it all sink in. My hand unconsciously strayed to the pendant, no, the amulet piece lying under my tee shirt. Ana honestly didn’t seem to know that I had it. But Conall, Breandan and Devlin did. Ana was a witch and gifted with the Sight. How could she not know that I was a guardian too? Something was off. There were still large gaping holes in the tapestry that was being woven in my mind. Devlin was an evil fairy-lord. Pure evil and he wanted my amulet piece so that he could try to open the grimoire. Lochlann, another bad ass fairy and Breandan’s older brother was leading the revolution to bring back the balance, and was therefore fighting against Devlin, which made him the good guy, right? The grimoire was a scary powerful book that Devlin had, but couldn’t open because it was locked. Somewhere in the middle of this myself and two other fairies had been chosen as guardians of the key, the amulets. I assume to keep them safe from evil, because though my moral compass was dubious at the best of times, I didn’t feel evil, which made me good too, right?

But then why did I not know any of this? Why had I been dumped on the steps of a Temple Priests house, glamoured as a human baby with no memory or knowledge of whom or what I was? Surely, if this amulet were important it would be madness to entrust it to someone who may have just thrown it away one day. Everything was falling into spaces, but some bits didn’t fit.

One thing I knew for certain, though I was curious - who wouldn’t be -

I didn't want a part in any of it. No matter what Ana thought it was too big for me. The whole political battle between the rebels and the Tribe, and the battle between good and evil. The only reason I could see I was a part of it was because of my connection to Breandan. After all, no long lost relative had come forward to claim me.

The macabre tone of my thoughts had me scrambling around my own head for a distraction. "Uh, the way you talk," I said, "you consider yourself part of the fairy rebels?"

She snorted. "The gods created the Source and we all came from that. I don't care they look different to me. We're made of the same basic stuff."

"But you're human," I said stubbornly taking in her normal ears, skin and lack of other limbs. There was no glamour over her; I'd looked hard for it.

"If you want to get technical about it I'm the white witch, but for the most part yeah, human. You are most definitely fairy."

"So it's true then. All witches are bad? Barring you, I mean."

Sadness flickered across her expression. "Fairies are magical. It is the essence of what they are, and for the most part it protects them from influences that can rot a person to the core - jealousy, greed and spite to name a few. Humans who can touch the Source, witches, do not have these natural safeguards."

"What makes you different?"

"The same thing that makes you different." Her eyes lingered on my wings. "The will of the gods."

Stunned by her knowledge I pried without thinking. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

I thought back to when I was fifteen three years before. Trying to work out why my body was so developed, and why I didn't want the boys to touch me like the other girls did. I compared myself to this powerful girl and cringed. I went to pull my hood up but at Ana's stern look I rested my fingers on the fabric, and my stomach clenched.

"I am in so much trouble. I don't think I can do this."

She glared at me with a face of thunder. “You know what, this ‘oh no poor me’ routine has to stop, Rae.”

“What?” I wailed. “I have a right to be upset.”

I raised my palms helplessly and swallowed the excess saliva building in my mouth.

“You don’t have time to mope, or be worry about what’s coming, because it’s already here. Sorry to be the one to break it to you, but it’s crunch time. I wish you had more time to prepare, I do, but fact is you don’t. You need to face who you are and accept your place beside Breandan. The Tribe has stolen the amulet of protection. They grow more powerful, and now they have one of the four. In many futures you try to run but trouble finds you. If you don’t accept this-”

Clamping a hand over my mouth, I leaped up and dashed into a corner before emptying my stomach onto the ground. I heaved until nothing but clear, acidic liquid dribbled from my lips. My mind scuttled over everything and I retched, puking air. Leaning my head on the cool stone I clung to the trailing ivy rooted to the wall, and breathed in the light scent from flowers sprouting in-between the gray bricks.

Pushing away from the wall I swayed back over to Ana. I let my legs give way so I was seated, leaning forward limply.

“Chew this.” She pushed something green into my hand.

I stuffed it in my gob and chomped down. A clean taste exploded in my mouth, down my throat, and into my belly until the nauseated feeling subsided. I spat the wad of green out of my mouth and raised it in my upturned palm.

She motioned to the lump of weedy grass. “I laid a spell to help you.”

With bigger things to be upset about then a bit of magic, I tossed it and pushed hair out my eyes. “How am I supposed to react to this?” Thinking on it I came up with nothing. My wings flexed behind me and I sighed. “This is too big for me, it was too big when I found out I wasn’t human.” My hand drifted to touch an elongated ear; it twitched beneath my touch. “You’re telling me that I have to be with Breandan or he and his brother will fail in their quest to overthrow Devlin. I don’t even know why they are against him.”

Though I could guess. Devlin seemedcruel.

“I wish I could say something wise and comforting, but that’s not what I’m here for. That’s not my purpose. But I know you’ll make the right choice.” Leaning over to give me a hug she pressed her cheek to mine. I stiffened. Moving away, she laughed quietly. “Oops, sorry. I forget.”

Shrugging it off, I plucked at the grass. “How do you manage with all this?”

She grinned. “It’s cool. My strength is my Sight, but I can draw some power from the Source should I want. I have known who and what I am since I can remember. The rebels are the only real family I’ve ever known. I don’t want to be without them.” We shared a smile before Ana looked up to the night. “Nothing can compare to fairy kind.” She lay flat on her back, and I paused trying to figure out how settle beside her.

A few minutes of unsuccessfully lying down and shifting into awkward positions I leaned up and thought move out a little, and my wings moved out a little. I leaned back and the grass pricked the skin between my shoulder blades. My wings folded up against my body to cocoon me; curving overhead. The overall effect was snug as we watched clouds roll across the sky.

“Tell me about them?” I asked.

“They’re all different, living solitary lives for the most part, even those sworn to the Tribe. The majority remains Outside, but there are those who live within the Wall disguised as human, like me.”

“You’re not a slum girl,” I said. “You talk like an upper dwell.” I wondered how many other demons were living as ordinary humans. “It’s strange to think of demons as so civilized. I’m used to thinking of them as, well, something close to animals.”

Ana snorted a laugh. “Do you consider yourself as animal?”

I chose to avoid answering that.

“Can you tell me how many demons there are?”

“My, my counting assets already.” She laughed at my blush. “The other demons have their own laws, and I have no idea about their numbers. We believe the fairy number to be teetering at a thousand,” her voice was proud. “There may be others hiding in the regions across the seas. Then there are the outcast fairies.”

My tail curled around my waist to jiggle in front of my eyes. I clasped the tip in one hand and pushed it behind me. “You’re going to get bored having to explain every comment to me really soon, but outcast fairies?”

“It’s nice to get a new perspective on things. Don’t worry; you deal with all this rather well.” She spoke with confidence, and scratched her nose. “Where was I?”

“The, uh, outcast fairies,” I reminded her.

“They hold no allegiance to the Tribe or us rebels, around three quarters of our kind.”

“Why so many? Don’t they like having someone to guide them?”

“Well, you have to think about it without taking sides. The fairies are divided into two squabbling factions,” she made a sweeping gesture, “and wedged between the rest of the supernatural kingdom. Make no mistake, we are the most powerful race.”

“Proud,” I said.

“Honest,” she said back. “The vampires launched the Rupture, and we had no choice but to fight since the humans tarred all demons with one brush. It was either fight or be slaughtered. Devlin has made relations between fairies and other demons terrible, unbearable. Made mistakes that got us stuck in mess we are in now. If you were the outcast fairies, who would you trust?”

There were once only two people in the world I trusted, I could relate. But still. Lightening split the picturesque sky and the hairs on the back of my neck rose.

“Crazy,” I said.

“No, I am not and neither are you. This is the way it is.” She paused. “It could be worse.”

“Time is up,” a voice said from behind me.

Breandan had arrived with Conall a few steps behind. Streaks of mud dirtied his face and sculpted chest, as if he had been rolling around on the floor. I didn’t see any serious wounds on him, but it was hard to tell under all those tattoos. I wondered again why he had so many. My gaze drifted up his chest and locked with his. I picked up his

intoxicating scent of earth and sun, and I dragged in a lungful like it was a drug.

“Breandan,” someone squealed from a distance.

The world shunted back into focus and my eyes left his. Ana launched herself onto him and he scooped her up into a bear hug, swung her round in a wide circle. I managed to keep a semblance of calm, keep my expression neutral, and I’m proud to say I did not drag her off him by the hair.

“Ana,” he said solemnly. “Whatchasee?”

“Everything,” she said, laughed.

“You made a joke,” I said then stood and busied myself brushing bracken off my jumper, refusing to meet the curious stares. It was just that Breandan didn’t seem the kind to crack a joke, and the fact he was doing it with her and not me was irritating.

Beaming up at him, Ana swung her arms and smiled coyly. I was getting a definite crush vibe from her. He dropped his hold on her and extended his hand to me. I stepped forward to clasp it, felt contentment. He didn’t ask about my missing glamour or make reference to my changed form, and I was grateful. His eyes rested for a long while on my wings then my tail. Heat crept up my neck and spilled into my cheeks. I ducked my head down so my hair covered my face.

I peeked up, and Breandan’s face was set, but glowing.

Ana rolled her eyes and ran her hand through her hair. “I’ll see you soon, Rae. Try to remember it’s pointless to run from yourself.” She paused as the lightening above struck again. Taking a last look at my face, she shook her head. “Be safe,” she called and made her way into the gloom of the trees.

I barely heard or acknowledged her. The clouds darkened and the air hummed with electricity. The panicky, manic urge to run made my breath come in shallow pants. I loved storms; already I could feel my skin prickling.

Conall’s face was turned to the sky. “Rae,” said and he looked at me. His eyes sparkled and cheeks glowed with two spots of colour. “I still have much to show and tell you, but now is not the time. I will see you soon and we’ll frolic. Enjoy the storm.”

He winked at me then the pale soles of his boots flashed through the trees, ponytail streaming until he was lost to sight. Man, he was fast.

It was hard to concentrate with the ruckus overhead. My palms began to sweat. My wings twitched madly, and my tail thrashed so quickly it almost vibrated. I concentrated hard on a single action before turning to face Breandan. I brought my fist hurtling forward and encountered air. His face creased with amusement as he moved with the fluidity of water. My punch missed him by a mile and in a move to fast for me to defend against Breandan spun to my front, grabbed my leg and opposite arm to hold me taut above his head. I wriggled and writhed unable to break his hold. The first fat drops of rain landed on my cheeks and neck.

“You have not been taught to fight well,” he said calmly despite my tail thumping his face.

“I cannot believe you didn’t tell me you arrogant, stupid sonofa-”

“Oh, you’re mad,” he said and dropped me.

I landed lightly on my feet, wings jack-knifing out to beat hard beside me. Straightening in a flash I got in his face. “Stop throwing me about.”

“You are not a weakling. To treat you as such would be an insult.”

As if channeling my anger lightening flashed. Thunder crashed behind it and the rain started to fall harder. The trees began to sway in the wind, boughs bowed steeply.

“You moron,” I said and seethed with anger.

His face flickered with hurt before falling blank. “What exactly are you upset about?”

“I looked like a fool. I didn’t even know there were rebels or amulets that could sway the balance of power into the hands of evil,” I sucked in a breath. “You told me nothing. Nothing.” Regulating my voice to conversation level, I thrust my hands into my pockets and pulled my wings back, embarrassed. The fire to fight left me and I felt an urge for the comfort of four walls. Rain plastered my hair to my head, dripped from my nose and fingertips. I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of the wet soil beneath me. “I’m the guardian of one third of the key, aren’t I? That’s what this thing is hanging around my neck. But why didn’t Ana know and why do you, Conall and Devlin know?”

My voice was barely a whisper. “I feel lost.”

Breandan drew me into him and his chest heaved with a sigh. His hand met the skin at my shoulder blades, between my pinions, and he started there. He stroked my wings in long, sweeping movement. I relaxed and let his touch soothe my body and mind. I was too stressed to deny myself this pain relief. No matter how twisted a message it gave.

“We should be enjoying the storm,” he said gently.

I looked into his face and unsuccessfully tried to hide my shock. “We like storms?”

He shook his head; a rash excitement lit his eyes. “We love storms. Our nature sings to its tune. You should see us during heat waves.”

I blushed deeply. “All this time I thought it was strange. The urges I got to run and dance. I could never figure it out.”

“Do you want to talk about what you’ve learnt?”

And just like that I was stiff. “You mean how you’re running around leading a rebel demon force until your brother gets his deserting ass back here?” My voice shook again.

“Ana was wrong to scare you like that,” he said.

I composed myself. It would be silly for me not to ask him anything. “Wait.” I pressed my hands into his chest. Rapt, I watched my fingertips sink into the firm, smooth skin. “I have a question about the Tribe’s last Priestess, the one who shifted the balance.” To make myself feel better I slid my fingers down his hard abs, developing a whole new appreciation for touching him.

Breandan looked perplexed. “I thought you didn’t want to talk about this.”

“I want to know more about fairies. I want to know more about you. Avoid the bits about me, okay?”

He stroked my hair and tilted my head so he could hold my eyes. “Ask.”

“You lead the rebels now? Until your brother gets back, I mean.”

“Yes. The majority are sensible allowing me freedom to pursue other

interests. Few break the rules. When they do they are found by the warriors, and brought to me for judgment. We're a solitary people. We don't need a ruler to dictate everyday life."

I chewed my lip, slotting the information in with what I already knew. "The Tribe is lead by the High Lord, right?"

His hand went still on my back and after half a breath resumed its gentle rub.

"Yes. The fairy High Lord has held the Tribe for centuries and lived more years than I, but less than Lochlann. Those under his charge are still alive and only the last fifty years has he allowed himself to be overcome by his baser nature."

"How many centuries has he held the Tribe?"

"Seven," he answered.

I blinked at his words. "Seriously?" He stayed quiet and I drummed up courage.

"How long have you been alive?"

His lips twitched. "Twenty years. I'm little more than a child in the eyes of some."

My fingers scrunched together on his chest, left shallow slashes that healed the instant I made them.

"I knew you were older, but I never figured the gap was that small." I laughed in relief. "I'm eighteen."

"You're not eighteen."

I frowned. "Uh, yes I am."

Breandan slid one of his hands to entwine his fingers with mine. His other tilted my head up and held my chin. "Rae, you were born two hundred years ago."

The warmth of his touch helped smother the rumbling of hysteria into a tremble. "I don't understand."

"You're birth would have superseded mine, but something happened. The little I've found out suggests your birth mother laid a spell on you to-"

“Stop.” I tried to pull my head away, wiggle my hand free.

Breandan held firm. “Be calm.”

“I told you I don’t want to talk about me.”

“You told me you wish to know of the Priestess.”

“Yeah,” I said wary. “I do. Who was she?”

I knew who she was. Of course I knew, but I needed to hear him say it.

“The last pure fairy and tribal Priestess was your birth mother.” He paused letting me take this in. “She gave you that amulet and hid you among the humans.”

“What-” I swallowed hard. “What did she do to tip the balance? Her bad decision what was it?”

“She chose to break her vow to her husband and lie with a human male.”

“The human male was my father?”

Breandan shook his head. “No. You are pure-blooded fairy. As is-” Cutting off his jaw clenched, and for once, he avoided my gaze.

“Whatever it is you’re keeping from me I will find out. You need to start being honest with me.” The hypocrisy of my words had me cringing inside.

“Some secrets are not mine to tell.”

I rubbed at my face and nodded. Considering the secrets I held, I was not going to push him. “Okay. So she broke her vow to my dad, got in trouble. How does that break the balance?”

“Your father killed the human and your mother. She didn’thandle it well.”

“She got mad and did it on purpose, you mean.”

“Her heart was broken and she could no longer see the reason for her being. She abandoned her purpose and split the amulet in three. She gave two of the pieces to those who were closest to her heart. The amulets of protection and,” he touched my chest where my pendant

lay, “wisdom.”

I stifled a laugh. This thing was supposed to inspire me with wisdom? Yeah right, like anything I had done in the last day had been wise.

“And the other?”

He shrugged. “We are not sure.” He stroked a finger down the bridge of my nose. “Do you feel better informed now?”

“At least I understand some of why this is happening to me. Why you’re so eager to be with me.”

“No matter how you try to reason it, you belong to me and I to you. No matter what has happened in the past, or future forces that will try to keep us apart. Lochlann will return and take his rightful place. Then I can focus on helping you become who you are destined to be.”

Who was I destined to be? I didn’t feel ready to hear what I knew was coming, and I threw a question at him before he could continue.

“We are immortal?”

“We live for millennia, but are relatively easy to kill if damaged quickly enough so we cannot heal.” Contempt entered his tone. “Vampires are immortal.”

Uh oh. No. I did not want to talk about vampires.

“It’s too heavy, let’s change topic,” I said hastily. “Tell me why you left the Tribe, I want to understand what I’m facing. Were you just following Lochlann?”

“The decision was mine, and I made it. The Tribe is made up of simple fairies trying to live their lives. There are a core few devoted to Devlin and his way of life. These influence and control the rest. It is because of them demonkind is experiencing the darker side of the fairy race.” He face was sad. “It’s their nature which leads them to dominate. To twist things for their own gains.”

“They’re evil,” I said.

“Yes,” he replied bluntly. “I will not pretend that my brother is a saint, but he wants peace. Lochlann wishes to bring back the old ways.”

I pressed my fingertips to his face; let them trail along his scar to his jaw, careful this time for my talons not to scratch him.

“And you think that will be a good thing?”

He shrugged. “It cannot be worse than how we are now.”

“Lochlann is losing. He was hoping to have two amulets, but now he has none and the Tribe has one.” Breandan stiffened and his jaw cracked beneath my hand. “Apart from you, the rebels have no clue where any of the amulets are, but Devlin knows I have a piece.” At the surprise and hesitation I caught passing his face, something clicked for me. “Lochlann knows,” I said. “He thinks he knows where one is. That’s why he left so suddenly, isn’t it?”

I had my own suspicions as to where an amulet piece was, but if Lochlann had left his entire rebel force to go find it, surely I was wrong.

Breandan shrugged, not bothering to deny it. “He would not leave us for such a long time if it wasn’t important.”

“You should have told me all this.” My hand dropped as my face became as mad as my voice. “I’ve been fumbling around in the dark.” I pressed a hand to the space beneath my collarbones where the amulet piece lay. “I’ve been a target this whole time and you didn’t warn me.”

“I’m protecting you. We didn’t want you worrying about your birthright. Concentrate on getting used to your true form.”

“Gods, Breandan, enough already. Be plain, what is my birthright?”

“If I knew you would not overreact I would. As it stands, you had better ask Conall the next time you see him.”

Resting my forehead on his chest, I smelt the woods he liked to run in. Head butting it hard, I placed my hands on his sides.

“You can’t protect me from everything. I need to know these things sooner rather than later. You put me in more danger by keeping me in the dark.”

“Yes I can,’ he said matter of fact. “I may have failed my brother and my sister, but I will not fail you.”

At the mention of Maeve, I froze. My heart sunk to somewhere below the soles of my feet.

“Why do you think you have failed your sister?”

“Maeve has not returned. When one of us goes missing for so long-” He sighed. “No. It does me no good to think such thoughts.”

Leaning away I saw the pain in his eyes. Clasping my hands around him I pressed my eyes closed, and listened to the truth I desperately wanted to say crawling around my head. He needed to know what had happened to her, but he was already so upset about losing the amulet piece entrusted to him, which in a way was my fault too. If he hadn’t been so distracted by me crashing around in the woods, lost, he would have been more on guard to defend against the thief.

“I’m trouble,” I said. “One day you will hate me for it.”

Breandan pulled me away to kiss my eyelids, forehead and cheeks. “You’re mine,” he said. “The one thing I want for myself, and I could never hate you.” A gush of warm air down my throat made me smile. He stroked the bridge of my nose and followed his finger with kisses. “There is danger for you everywhere. Devlin is convinced you are key to the future. And you are right. He knows you have an amulet, but he cannot just take it. It must be given freely. The Tribe will try to take you from me, but together we are safe.”

His words made me feel ill. I was lying to him, and all he wanted was for me to feel safe. I didn’t deserve his trust. After all, I hadn’t given him all of mine. Before he could kiss my lips, I darted away.

Soon, I heard the tinkling of water, and came to a small stream. It was lovely, the craggy rocks and clear, crisp water. I drank until I was satisfied, and wiped my mouth on the back of my hand.

Something bright and golden caught my gaze in the glassy waters reflection.

My skin glowed. Ear tips slender, and elongated to points peeked through my wild halo of hair. I took out the twig holding it up, and it cascaded down, the inky tips resting slickly across my back. My tail snaked through the air over my shoulder, and my wings rustled. They were gold. Not a light brown or pretty hazel but dark, powerful gold that matched my eyes and wrapped around my shapely body. My mouth opened to gasp and I saw the brilliance of my teeth, sharp and fang like. The small whimper of sound that escaped sounded like chinking crystal. My eyes, sparkling pools of light, widened. I hesitantly ran a finger over my shapely jaw, and tilted my head slightly to the side. My profile was sleeker, yet softer and more regal. I

looked beautiful and I took my own breath away. I was scary, a demon.

“Rae.” Breandan’s voice was smooth and warm. He waited for me a few paces away.

It was this moment I realized how much I needed him safe. He was in danger, because Devlin wanted him dead. There had to be something, some way to keep him safe. The thought sent an icy chill down my spine. It was the first time in my life I had ever thought of someone else’s wellbeing before my own, and how was I supposed to protect him from forces I barely understood?

He jumped over the pool and landed on the other side, dislodging a few pebbles that rolled down and plopped into the water. The ripples that fanned out distorted my reflection.

Breandan’s face was lit up, glowing with excitement. “Enough doom, follow me,” he said.

I lost myself. We raced the thunder to where the lightening had struck. It was Breandan’s favorite game. We pushed each other about playfully, and played a demented game of hide and seek. Demented, because we could sense each other. There was nowhere to hide. I came to a stop, my chest heaving and breath coming hard. I pressed my front against a tree and waited. Strong arms enveloped me from behind, and I forgot I was in the embrace of a powerful demon as the storm raged around us. I pushed Breandan away and twirled. Hands spread, head flung back, I giggled as I tripped over my own foot. He caught me before I fell, and chuckled, cradling me in his arms.

Was being a demon meant to be fun? I still felt like me, like the Rae I always had been, just with a few extras.

“Thank you for explaining,” I said, genuinely grateful. I gripped his shoulder to beam into his luminous face. For the first time that day, everything didn’t look so dark.

“I know you wish to be normal, human, but soon you will see there is nothing better than what you are.” He set me on my feet and scrubbed a hand over his head. “When Lochlann returns we will be able to spend more time together, having fun.” His eyebrows pulled together and his face became thoughtful. “I worry I’m not doing this thing properly. I’ve never been bound to another before.”

Biting back a smile, on an impulse I pressed my fingers to his face. He

lifted my other hand to press it to his heart.

“It’s not bad,” I admitted. “I thought it would be, but the more I think about it, the less scary being tied to you seems.”

The, thing between us was complicated and tricky. I still hadn’t told him about Maeve or the vampire-boy in my wardrobe. The thought distracted me, and tugged me from the dreamlike state I was in. I needed to get back to Temple. Tomas was probably beyond pissed off right now and pacing my room like a caged predator.

Breandan smiled wickedly, clearly delighted. He stole a kiss and jogged backward. His face filled with mischief.

“A race,” he suggested and crooked his finger at me playfully.

I grinned; skipped to join him then ran, hearing his laughter behind me. I noticed my sense of direction since I had become a demon was stellar. My centre of gravity was rooted to everything around me. I moved and it shifted in relation to the direction of north. I knew how far I was from water, a deep cave or from a high place.

I got back first and wondered if he had let me win. Stomping my boots, mirroring the pound of my heartbeat, I did more happy spins, waiting to get dizzy and for Breandan to come catch me. Round and round I spun.

A figure, darker than the coming night stepped from the gloom and motioned to me.

I stopped dead.

Head spinning, a cry of panic was already bubbling in my throat. I drew in a deep breath, and reached to the Source. Not the best of ideas since I was hardly proficient, having only used it a few times before, but I was facing evil and it was no time to be scared of what I was, or what I could do.

A warm hand closed around my waist and pulled me back, shielded me.

My lungs collapsed, and a squawk of alarm was replaced with knee watering relief. I released my hold on the energy I’d gathered, felt it flow in a warm stream of power from my fingertips.

Breandan, eyes flashing blue fire stepped forward.

Devlin's laughter made my skin scrawl. "Breandan, you always were overprotective of your toys." He eased into a comfortable stance. He moved closer then I could see his face better. The sparkle in his eye seemed devilish now and the curve of his lips sinister.

"It is not overprotective to defend what is yours," Breandan replied and glanced over his shoulder.

I tried to do him proud and look less terrified. Yeah right. I was shaking like a leaf. Devlin had worked magic on me a few hours ago, and it had worked. I remembered the mumbling, quivering mess I had been and felt sick. If Breandan and Conall hadn't come along, I would have probably given him my amulet and agreed to go wherever it was he was trying to lure me to.

Losing his patience, Breandan shifted, easing his feet apart and asked, "What do you want?"

Devlin pointed to me. "She has spoken to the most powerful Seer of our time, the white witch. She is a fairy born of this region and by rights part of my Tribe unless she swears fealty to a usurper. I have a right to know what her future holds."

"Touch her and I kill you."

"By doing this, denying me the right to see her, you are naming her a prisoner or of your faction. If she swears fealty to Lochlann she will be named a rebel. She already has had a hard life at the hands of her mother. Will you truly subject her to a lifetime of being shunned by the majority of her true kind too?"

Breandan's face was ashen. He swallowed hard and looked at me over his shoulder, expression torn. I understood what Devlin was saying. Because I hadn't chosen a side I was automatically a Tribal fairy, but since Breandan had claimed me as his own he'd sentenced me to a life filled with death and destruction. I would have to always be cautious, always have to hide the amulet and myself. I was beginning to think even if I lost my piece I would still be tied to it. It would explain why Devlin did not grab the thing a month ago and take off.

Like Breandan said, there were rules to this thing. I just had to learn them.

In that moment I also realized it didn't matter what Breandan wanted or what Devlin wanted, but what I wanted. My moral compass was crooked at best, but I would never choose to be evil. But nor was I so

saint like, that I wanted to be part of a fairy revolution. I cared deeply for Breandan, maybe it was impossible for me not too, and so I stepped closer to him. If he let his nature rule him, Devlin could over power him easily. He needed to keep a level head, for what I had planned. I placed a hand on his shoulder and looked up into his face, my eyes pleading for him to calm down.

“Know you have forced my hand, cousin.” Devlin’s voice twanged with power and I turned in time to see his glamour drop.

His hair ignited, blazing with white light. His ears were elongated and had the point of fairy I found fascinating, but his face was so sharp, pristine in its formation my eyes found it hard to settle on one feature. His eyes were aflame, cold green flames. His hands and feet were clawed, wickedly spiky. I saw clearly now the difference between him and Breandan in their true forms. Devlin was a leader, powerful in his righteous hate for the rebels who threatened his authority. Breandan had his own power, but it was not born of dominance.

I caught the glint at Devlin’s chest as he shifted to set his feet apart, and my suspicion was confirmed. The colour and shape of it was too distinctive to be anything else other than an amulet piece.

Blinded by the urge to take it from him, I lurched forward. Breandan, confused by my behavior, pulled me back and tucked me under his arm.

Emerging from the shadows behind Devlin, fairies unsheathed their weapons. His eyes narrowed and skipped around the trees.

“Tron and Loki are dead,” said the willowy male to his immediate left. Lanky, his grey hair flowed on and on until it hit his knees. With pinched eyes and scraggly grey beard, his wrinkled face reminded me of the crushed velvet I had once seen decorating a Temple Priests robes. Clutched in his hand was a halberd. He jabbed it toward Breandan. “He caught their scent.”

That explained why Breandan had been delayed in racing me. I felt a surge of pride.

“No matter,” Devlin grated, a trace of irritation flickering across his expression. “Lochlann was always the better fighter. Four against two is more than enough. Wasp, my love?”

The wraithlike fairy-girls face blazed adoration and lunacy as she turned to him. Her long hair was a tangle of claret dreadlocks that

seemed alive, like snakes writhing around her face. Wide eyes glassy, her pouty green lips parted, waiting.

“Would you do the honor of taking Rae? Be careful not to break her, she can be quite temperamental.”

Mouth curling sadistically, she licked the edge of her blade. A flash of memory showed Ana pulling up her top to expose the scars carved into her flesh by this very demon. My stomach heaved and my lungs sucked air in heaving gulps.

Another male fairy slid closer, eager. An acre of green chest bared his copper Mohawk stood high from his head in stiff spikes. His almond eyes focused on Breandan, and his pierced tongue flicked out in anticipation.

Chapter Seven

They feinted around us in a loose circle and tightened inch by inch. I twisted my head round to watch Breandan's back, and wished I had a weapon. Anything, a big stick, would do. Failing sunlight highlighted the last leaves of autumn. They twisted into grotesque and beautiful shapes in the air as they twirled down. And then I was frightened. Knee trembling and suffocating on my own air, petrified that Breandan would die here, defending me and I would end up with these psychopaths for the rest of my life. Trapped, forever.

"What do we do?" I kept my hands clamped around his waist. My neck ached from trying to see in every direction at once.

Slowly, the Tribe fairies drew closer with their leader closest. The prospect of wining so alive in his eye, Devlin seemed a lunatic.

Breandan searched my face for something then said, "Run."

"No." My voice only wobbled a little. I would not leave him here, no matter how afraid I was.

"Hear me, Rae." There was deep persuasion in his words as he tried to compel me. "You must run."

I snorted at the stupid idea of him giving his life for mine. As if I could live without him after he'd gone and made me all devoted and loyal. We would leave together or not at all. I was ready to die here, with him. They would have to kill me for I would never stop trying to kill them if Breandan died.

He shook his head in a movement so infinitesimal I could barely see it. "I can't defend against their spells and conjure a portal to take us. I don't have enough focus. Please, Rae."

"No," I repeated, firmer this time.

Hissing, I bared my teeth at the copper haired fairy as he took a large, crouched step toward us. His hand twitched on the hilt of his knife. The lack of light made his titled eyes sinister in what would be a handsome face.

"What about Conall?" I asked in a burst of smarts.

For a second time he shook his head.

We needed to escape, and an idea tickled the back of my mind. I knew magic was the only way to survive this, but if what I was planning didn't work we would die, painfully. The alternative, Breandan fighting three fairies singlehanded, was not an option. I would not die like this, trapped and afraid because I was worth much more. I was strong and smart. Less than a day ago when I had believed I was human, I'd been the best at everything I did, and I was not set on changing that now. I was strong and I had magic.

"I'm a demon," I murmured, locking my sights on the amulet.

I shifted away so I had room to move. Breandan's gaze flashed to my face, puzzled by my change of tone. He clasped my hand as if to keep me anchored to him.

The fairies launched their attack. Teeth and blades glinting, they lunged for us. Lurching forward to meet their charge, I smashed my fist into Devlin's chest and scrunched my fingers together until I felt the cold, hard press of the amulet and simplymoved. We were shunted sideways. Pushing through a thick, unyielding wall of rubbery substance. It stretched against me, refusing entry, but I forced the pressure to abide my will and felt us slip through the hole that opened. Our surroundings shifted from vibrant green to faded grey stone.

I stumbled, releasing both Breandan and Devlin in shock at the abrupt shift of location. Shocked and a little misty eyed, I looked down at the palm-sized green and gold amulet clutched in my fist. Runes I didn't recognize were etched into the circumference, and it had two smaller rings in the circle. It looked like you could slot two smaller pieces in. I had hoped Devlin would have slotted the two pieces the Tribe had together, but this was only one third. The power of it hummed, rattled my bones. The amulet seemed to sigh and ripples of power slid across my hand, up over my torso and flowed over my legs. Biting down as it adjusted itself to its new master. Then it bubbled out, extending until I felt more connected to everything. Huh? I didn't feel protected, I felt wide open. I knew my amulet was meant to inspire wisdom (yeah right), but his one was meant to protect. I made a noise of triumph that morphed into one of annoyance. I'd meant to leave Devlin behind with the others and take us to my dorm room, not the crumbling church I'd met the white witch in earlier. And, I had meant for this damn thing to go to Breandan, not attach itself to me. I tried to drop it on the floor hoping it would reverse whatever had happened, but my hand wouldn't let it fall.

The gods be damned, I could not catch a break.

I stuffed the amulet in my pocket then the sheer impossibility of what I had done caught up with me. Giggling in disbelief my brain rattled in my skull, settling back into place as I toppled over to puke my guts up. Scraping my mouth with the back of my hand, I whirled in fright at the commotion behind me.

Devlin and Breandan darted around each other in smooth, bold movement. The fight was beastly and magnificent. Their speed alternated from painfully slow to supernaturally fast. I couldn't see half the moves they executed, but when I could I felt sick.

The need to protect Breandan submerged the rock of my fears in a sea of courage. Confident we had broken away from Devlin's guard, I felt for the Source. Grasping the pulsing energy a wave of nausea rolled over me, head to toe. Stomach heaving and pitching dangerously, I steadied my legs. My attention was drawn once again to the fight at the sound of a pained grunt. Gone was the illusion of normalcy and tentative peace. Both feral and vicious, the boys feinted around the space with lethal intent. Breandan and Devlin smacked each other about with their fists and feet, and loud thumps, and hollow crunches accompanied each blow.

I spat a curse and planted my feet, swallowed the bile burning the back of my throat and nose. It tasted sour. I drew deeply on the Source until I thought my body would burst from the pressure bubbling my blood. Focusing my energies on what I wanted was hard. Each of Devlin's punches on Breandan's body was like a blow to my own. I molded the mass of chaotic energy I summoned into a fist of air, panting under the strain.

Breandan lost concentration; eyes darting to mine they filled with concern. Victory flashed across Devlin's face as he struck with fatal precision.

Releasing air, I reached to fire. A ball of light appeared before me and grew. Larger, and larger until I realized it was more than I could control. Breandan would be too close to use the damn thing, so what did I do with it? The flames stared to burn blue then whips of white started to flash across its surface.

"Rae, hold very, very still and do not let it go."

I looked up to see Breandan and Devlin had stopped fighting. They stood side by side, and the alarm on their faces terrified me.

My lip trembled and the fireball bloated slightly.

Breandan took a hesitant step toward me. “Rae, love, please stay calm.”

“I think I think it’s a little big,” I said nervously. “At least you’ve stopped fighting.”

“It was either stop or watch you kill us all,” Devlin said angrily.

A ferocious hate blazed across Breandan’s face as he looked at the fairy-lord, but he schooled his expression and focused on me. His face was blank, but his eyes were tight. “It’s going to be fine. I want you to do exactly what I say, alright?”

I nodded manically. The ball of fire hovered in front of me, rolling, expanding and collapsing in on itself slightly. What would happen if it exploded in my face?

“I have courage and I can do this,” I said out loud.

Devlin rolled his eyes.

“Yes,” Breandan agreed. “You are very brave. Now, I want you to think of the fire ball as the wind.”

“Like a tornado?”

“No!”

The fireball lengthened, and spun into a cyclone of flames. A face flashed into my mind and then it was off, sucking Devlin into its centre. Consumed in wildfire he bellowed in anger. The fire swirled into a glowing ball leaving him singed, but unharmed. He bounced the bloated sphere of death in his palm then hurled it toward Breandan.

“Stop,” I cried and reached out to call the power back.

The fire winked from existence, but the heat of it enveloped me. Falling to my knees, I batted at the small fires that erupted on my clothes, and watched in confusion as the fist of air I’d conjured hurtled toward the fairy-boys, who had returned to their fight. I was powerful enough to conjure two spells at once? Even as I realized something was wrong with my conjuring, my eyes widened at the glow surrounding them, and I understood too late they used magics of their own.

The casting broke with such impact the ground shook.

Shields conjured for protection bent and exploded. Both boys were flung back and carried by an unstoppable force. The churning energy of their spells rent apart fanned out, like ripples in a still pond. I vibrated as the force encountered my mass and hammered it. I was thrown from my knees, and kicked across the floor at breakneck speed. Each ripple slammed and beat at me until all I could do wait for it to end. A wall was in my way and as I crashed through it the stone dragged at my skin. I lay dazed. Unable to move, think or breathe. Black spots danced across my vision and my ears filled with a high note of sound. I scrunched my eyes shut. There was blood in my mouth and dirt rammed to back of my throat. I couldn't smell anything, my nose felt thick and throbbed. Amulet of protection my left butt cheek. I gasped, my chest expanding to suck in air in heaving gulps. The busted up thing known as my body was numb.

A hand pressed on me, checking I was whole.

"Breandan," I sobbed. "It hurts so bad."

Coughing up speckles of dirt, I lay a hand on my chest and brought it away to see dark red.

"Lie still."

The voice, familiar yet unwelcome caused bizarre dread to gush through me. It was not the voice I wanted to hear.

"Get off me," I said, breathless. "Don't touch me."

Despite the pain I wrestled and twisted and attacked with my hands but Devlin deflected me without difficulty.

"Let go." Breandan loomed above, not a scratch on him. His blade bit into Devlin's jugular drawing blood that trickled to soak his collar. Yet he hesitated to let me go. I glared up at him like he was a mad man. "Now," he snapped.

Breandan clasped my extended arm and pulled me into him, keeping his eyes deadlocked on Devlin. On his knees, Devlin's hair and eyes were half crazed. My blood stained his hands, and his clothes were singed and smoking at the edges.

If I were a were-cat I would be roaring.

My heart battered my chest as I reached the conclusion the fight had ended. Breandan had won, and I saw in Devlin's face he was facing something nasty. The defeat at the hands of a younger and weaker enemy, something a tribal leader could never live down. Sweat slicked my palms, and I rubbed them on my jeans. I thought it through quickly, if I wanted to suggest something extreme. I mean, reverse the situation and Devlin would kill Breandan without hesitation. Was his life Breandan's to claim? The fairy culture seemed deeply steeped in honor and tradition. Lochlann was the rightful leader of the rebels, not Breandan. If he killed the tribal leader I didn't know what it would mean. It could cause more damage to the fairy hierarchy than leaving him alive would. My eyes travelled down to a puddle of my blood dripping in steady plunks to the floor. I swayed, but before I staggered, I was in his arms.

"This is your own fault for not minding your own business," Breandan said and looked down his perfect nose at me. "Our shields were only conjured to protect. If they had triggers attached you would be dead. Using magics on a whim is beyond irresponsible, Rae. It puts you in danger. You must not go beyond your capabilities."

Tossing my head back in defiance was a bad idea, the forest rolled.

"He was going to kill you," I said petulantly.

The look he shot me had me cowering in his arms. "Such little faith you have in your mate."

Breandan glanced at Devlin, who was still frozen like stone; decided he was not a threat and turned his back to set me down on a fallen log.

Devlin shifted, coming back to himself after the shock of losing. Pressing a hand to his temple then threading his fingertips through his white-blonde hair, his hand kept travelling down until it swept around his neck and chest. His eyes widened, went wild as they darted around the ground. His gaze fell on me, and I met it with cool indifference. Swallowing at the look of expectation on his face, I couldn't help but slide a hand over my pocket. Devlin followed my gaze and then grinned.

He moved onto Breandan, "One would think you want to kill me, boy." Smiling impishly, dimples appeared on his cheeks.

Breandan growled; a low rumble that darkened his expression and heated my blood. A hiss seeped from my parted lips, and I placed a

hand on his stomach, scrunched my fingers together so my talons pierced his skin. The pain was intentional to ground him. His hand slipped into mine as he regained control.

“You will both pay for this,” Devlin said and smiled. “In ways you could never imagine.”

Breandan made a small noise, but remained still. The smile slid of Devlin’s face and his eyes narrowed.

“Breandan,” I began wearily. “What-”

He placed a finger in my lips. “Rae, go back to the Temple now.”

I blinked up at him. “But, why can’t I stay? I want to go with you.” I spoke with his fingers on my lips.

“I’m taking Devlin to the Grove.”

I breathed out slowly. “Okay, why can’t I come to? After all I’m a fairy too. I should know where this place is.” I lifted my chin defiantly. “I want to see it.”

Breandan risked turning his back on Devlin to grab me by the shoulders, lift me up and set me on my feet. I could feel my face morphing to a sulky expression. He looked me in the eye. “I want to you be introduced to the people with no distractions. Not tainted by his association. Do you understand?”

After a pause I nodded. I could see his point. I would be a great point of interest if I turned up looking like hell with Breandan dragging Devlin behind him. It was frustrating, because it felt like he was keeping me in the shadows. But there was no logical reason for him to do that, so it was just me, silly Rae overacting.

“I’ll go back,” I mumbled into my shoulder and half turned. “Watch yourself with him, okay?”

Breandan gave me a little shove. “Walk back and I will run. I’ll be with you before you can miss me.”

Devlin grinned at me. What was so funny? Did he know something I did not?

I shivered, and started off at a slow walk. I was not afraid in the blue and purple forest surrounding me. It was peaceful. As I wandered

back, I slid my glamour back on, and tugged at the gaping hole at my back where my tee shirt had given way for my wings. The world became darker and it felt like I was draped under a heavy curtain. My limbs dragged, and my hearing, sense of smell became muted. How had I functioned like this for eighteen years? Finally alone, I took a moment to think on everything that had happened to me. The day seemed endless, and I hoped there were no more surprises in store. I didn't know how much more I could take. I was dying to pee, so I squatted behind a tree and relived my self, humming low in my throat.

Back on the compound, I was reaching for Bayou's door when a heavy hand landed on my shoulder. The hand was warm, human warm, and it spun me around and pressed me back into the door.

"Lord Cleric," I protested and pushed forward, but he held firm.

I was stronger than him of course, but I let him pin me to the door as the Lady Cleric from that morning came out of the shadows. I dipped my head in a show of respect but my mind was racing. This was not good. It was the middle of the night, I was not asleep in bed like the other Disciples, and I looked like I had been to hell and back.

"Hai, Disciple," the Lady Cleric said in a nasal drawl.

She had a slight accent and upward tilt to her eyes. She was a small thing, tiny hands and feet obscured by mittens and clunky black boots. Her mousey brown hair hung straight, severely parted in the centre and cut blunt at the ends, and over her eyebrows in a fringe. She was not attractive, or ugly either she just looked mean.

"Hai, Lady Cleric," I replied.

I didn't know her name, so I simply said the honorific keeping my eyes downcast and my voice small and quiet at an attempt at meekness, whilst I scrambled around my head to get my story straight. This treatment of me was against the rules. This told me two things. One, that they suspected me to be the girl in the forest that morning. Two, they had already tried the official route and had probably been told to take a hike by the Priests. Oh gods. Or they were acting with Sect approval and their orders where to take care of me quietly.

And I'd handed myself to them on a platter.

"Looks like you're doing some hard thinking there," Tu said. "Why so nervous, Rae?"

I looked my teacher in the eye, and could not hide the flash of hate in my glare. He faltered and the pressure on my shoulder eased. I used it to slide away and stand up straight. I felt the wind blow past and sent a chill up my exposed spine. How would I explain my ripped top? I lifted my chin and looked between them.

“Is there something I can help you with? I’m tired after my run, and I would like to sleep.”

They shot looks at each other. “Do you often run in the middle of the night?” The Lady Cleric looked me up and down. “Looking sodisheveled?”

I scrunched my fingers into fists behind my back. “Yes, Lady Cleric. I like to run at night. I find it soothing.”

“Do you run in the morning?” Tu asked quietly.

I nodded my head. “Sure. The security guy often lets me out in the pre dawn. I circle the Temple grounds and come back.

The Lady Cleric tilted her head. “Sounds innocent enough.”

I smiled somewhat tightly. “Do you run, Cleric? If you do you will know how peaceful it can be.”

“Yes. I too find it soothing. Killing demons can be stressful.”

I flinched, just a little, but enough to confirm their suspicions. Normal people did not flinch at the mention of killing demons. It was seen as a good thing.

“We know all about your morning runs, Rae. But that’s not why we are here. It’s what led us to you, but not why we’re here.”

I swallowed a couple of times before I could say. “I don’t think I follow you. Led you to me?”

“You know there is an in and out list for the gate?”

I closed my eyes briefly, realizing the blunder before I answered. “Yes, Lord Cleric.

“This morning, you went out as usual, but you didn’t come through the gate again.” He pointed behind him, where the black iron gates lurked. “You showed up in my class sure enough, and asked a fewconcerning questions. When we came back to the class you looked

most preoccupied. Then you skipped all of your afternoon classes. Most concerning."

My hand reached behind me and curled around Bayou's door handle.

"I understand Lord Cleric," I said humbly. "I will come to your classroom tomorrow morning to discuss my punishment."

The Lady Cleric's face twisted. "No, Disciple Wilder. You are coming with us. Now."

I jerked the door open and bolted through it. Taking the stairs two at a time a hand snagged my ankle and I went down. I smacked my head on the stair in front of me, and was half dragged back down by my calf. Flailing to grab the railing rushing by, I caught one and held on. I half turned, and kicked with my other leg catching the Lady Cleric by the side of her head. She let me go and I scrambled up the stairs on all fours. Up the second flight, I heard her close behind me and plucked my key out of my back jean pocket. I heard her take the second flight of stairs, cursing the gods as my hand tried to slot my key in the lock. My hand trembled. As it slid in and clicked, I opened the door and turned to get the Lady Cleric's fist straight square in the face. Pain exploded out from my nose and radiated across my cheekbones. I flew back, and landed hard on my back with a flat thump. The Lady Cleric stepped in and kicked the door closed behind her. Glamoured as human, I could see nothing in the dark, but I could hear her raspy breaths.

I wiped at my bleeding nose. Why was it not healing?

"Demon bitch," she spat. "That's what you are, isn't it? A demon. That was the only way you evaded the dogs, my tracking."

"It's not what you think," I sobbed and crawled backward.

"I knew it was you, but Tu wasn't sure. He tried to convince me it was just a coincidence. That one of his precious students could never be one of them." The venom in her voice made me tremble even harder. "You disgust me, I read your file. You've been hiding among us since a baby. Fooling that old Priest into thinking that you were an abandoned ward."

"No, it wasn't like that." My heart hurt when I thought of the Priest who had found me outside his door. I would never do anything to hurt him. It was him who had suggested I be enrolled at Temple when he saw how I had survived at the orphanage. I shook my head again. "It

wasn't like that."

I was afraid. Had I been this afraid when I'd met Breandan? Or when I'd met-I swear, my heart stopped then kicked twice before a cold sweat broke out on my palms. I couldn't even think his name, because then it would be real. The horror of what was about to happen would become a reality, and there would be no taking it back. I hobbled up and pressed myself against the wall.

"Tomas," I whispered.

I felt him shift beside me before I saw his silhouette slink forward. I heard his snarl a second before I held my palms up and out, the words to call him off dying on my lips when I thought hard about what she would do to me. Would she have taken me to the Priests for judgment, or would she have killed me?

I watched. I watched him move silently around her, and watched as his fangs ran out. She was still advancing toward me, hyped on hate, and unaware her own death was less than a moment away. He grabbed her head, and clamped a hand over her mouth to smoother her scream. Yanking her shoulder down, he curled his fingers around her cloak to rip it away and expose her flesh. His head hung suspended against the smooth ivory of her neck, and I watched her eyes widen in horror. Instant tears make them glisten as Tomas twitched then bit down. A spray of blood splashed against the wall and my face. I was unable to look away. It was loud, grizzly and violent. The heels of the Lady Cleric's boots thumped on the hardwood floor, and the salty smell of her blood filled the air. Her dying wail was heard only by me as a senseless keen, a single sustained note. It lasted a few seconds. It lasted an age. Then, when he was done, Tomas let her lifeless body fall to the floor with a hollow thud.

It took me less than a moment to see the immense danger of my situation. I started to creep along the wall, keeping myself as small as possible. Tomas stood in the middle of the room, savoring his kill. Good for him, bad for me. I made it all the way to the door then the darkness swarmed around me.

Before I could squeal, Tomas had hold of my wrist and yanked me forward. I pulled against him, again pressing myself into the door. I held still as his tongue swept over my skin, smoother than a normal tongue. He lapped up the blood I'd wiped from my nose and groaned. He loomed over me, brown eyes liquefying.

“You smell like sunlight,” he said darkly.

His fingers brushed over my pulse point then his eyes flashed black. He bent my wrist back and I cried out in pain.

“You have to let me go,” I said and kept a tight rein on the urges of my nature.

Fear pressed on my mind made it hard to think. Made it hard to remember he was here to talk not hurt me. This demon, this vampire who right now thirsted for my blood wanted to talk, and I’d left him here for half the night, hungry. He’d just sucked the life out of a Cleric, but it didn’t seem to have been enough. She had been a small thing. If I attacked it would be fatal, for he would succumb to his baser instinct.

Fangs still dripping with blood, my blood; his chest started to rise and fall rapidly.

“Are you going to bite me, Tomas?” I did not snatch my hand away; it would excite rather than subdue him. “You promised no biting and I trusted you. I trust you.”

“I am what I am,” he said, slowly.

Bringing my wrist back to his mouth, his fangs grazed over a vein and the lush tearing of my skin punctured the edgy silence. He made a noise half way between a growl and a pained keen.

“Don’t do this.” I tugged my hand, unable to help myself. His eyes heated. “If you don’t let go-”

“What will you do?” His voice was dark, filled with anticipation. He pushed my sleeve further up my arm to expose more of my skin. “I want to taste you. I have since the first moment I breathed your scent.”

With a sigh of triumph, he opened his jaw wide, and bit down.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I felt my skin divide as his fangs sank into me. Gods, it hurt, it hurt. His cold lips brushed my skin and it burned as he sucked. Then it changed. Subtly, the burning started to sweep over me in tingly pulses of pleasure. My eyes flickered open and I moaned. A tide of lust flowed through me and invaded secret places they had no business being. Thick blood gushed down my hand and overflowed from his mouth, only for him to lap it up. A wave of

fatigue had my knees buckling.

“Tomas,” I shouted and reached out to the well of energy now mine to control, all I had left to defend myself with. I pushed power into my voice as I called his name and it boomed. It was loud, and echoed through me, made the walls quake.

Head flying back, dark hair streaming across his face, he gasped and clutched a hand to his head. He spun, dragging me with him like a rag doll and threw me across the room. Before my body hit the floor, for a split second it was like I could fly. Had I been a clever girl, I would have dropped my glamour and used my wings to land softly on the floor. I was too messed up to do anything but cry. When I landed, I rolled and rolled before crashing into the base of the wall. Thank the gods my room was small. Tomas staggered back and hit the wall on the opposite side. He bent over, trembling and mumbling incoherently to himself.

“Tomas,” I repeated, quieter this time.

I needed to know he was okay. If not I would need to run. I didn’t want to fight him, so I would run. He was by the door, but I had magic now and I knew how to use it. Not very well, I was likely to create a fireball big enough to obliterate us both, but it would be better than being sucked dry.

“Wait,” he said hoarsely. His eyes cleared up and he fell to his knees. His hand reached out to me; palm up and it shook. “I’m in control now. Wait.”

I nodded and pressed myself into the wall. Tomas’s vampire smell and the salty tang of my blood filled my nostrils. Sweat trickled down my brow, and I focused on controlling my breathing as my body repaired itself. Oh gods, thank you. My nose felt better already, as did the rest of my body. When Tomas had tossed me my shoulder and left side had taken the brunt of the impact when I’d hit the ground. I’d felt a rib or two crack. I was upset but strangely calm at the same time. Ana had said a vampire would bite me and she had been right, of course she’d been right. Tomas was a vampire, but I had held my own and taken care of myself. Yes, I had been thrown across a room and used as a tasty post dinner beverage, but still.

After a few beats he stood and crossed the space. He stopped a few paces shy of me.

“I was hungry. You were supposed to be here at sunset. I could not

leave without talking to you."

"I didn't have a choice." I glared up at him, my fear becoming anger. "The fairies came back for me during the day, what was I supposed to do? I tried."

"We had an agreement. You broke it."

"If I came back here before they had shown me what they needed to they would have found and killed you," I said harshly. "I wouldn't have been able to stop them."

"Stop them?" There was a trace of surprise in his tone. His dark eyes narrowed.

I met him stare for stare. "Like you said, we had an agreement. I promised to hear you out and a safe dark place."

"I saved your life and you repay me with disrespect."

"I've kept my end of the deal. I'm here aren't I? I'm sorry I am late, but it was unavoidable and y'know what, ditto. I saved your life too, you ungrateful ass. How long would you survive in the sunlight against a fairy or two?"

He was disquieted. I could tell this from the way his face and body became motionless. The pulsing dark that surrounded him thickened, and it was like I could almost hear it humming. It extended in curling wreathes and drifted forward to settle over me. It was not a restraining blanket of fear this time, but gentle welcoming. We were silent for a long while, taking comfort in each other's presence. It was strange. Now the dark had embraced me it was like I could perceive Tomas. He was no longer a scary vampire-boy, but a boy who just happened to be more than human. The balance had shifted between us, stepped into something unknown. Curling my wounded arm into my side, already flaring up and healing, I pulled my sleeve down to cover my wrist. Tomas helped me stand and straightened my clothes. I wiped at the blood smeared across his mouth, looking at it made me queasy and if I saw him lick it up I may be forced to try running away again. His skin was icy and slick.

"Breandan can never know," I said and stepped away.

"This Breandan is who?" he asked curiously then stiffened. His voice was dark and angry, yet still, it stroked me from the inside out. He stepped closer and sniffed at my hair. Then he dipped his head and

slid his mouth along the side of my neck, lips cold and smooth. “He is the fairy I smell on you.”

“He’ll kill you.”

I checked my forearm. It had healed and I fingered the two crescents now permanently scarring my skin. Good thing I wore my hooded jumper with its sloppy sleeves like a second skin.

“I have no plans to talk to this fairy. He will never know, not that it would be the first thing I would say should we meet.”

“What would be the first thing?”

“Nothing. We would fight and one of us would die, of course.” He sounded as if it were a simple, common thing. “And now we talk, the night calls to me.” I waited silently, like a good girl, but he paused. Rather, he hesitated. “Rae-”

We locked eyes and the blackness enveloped me. There was no more space between us, nothing to stop us coming together. He reached out, clasped my hip and pulled me into him. As my body molded to his, his lips nudged my head back and he tangled his other hand in my hair. The scent of him was inexplicably appealing. He still smelt like a vampire, but it was no longer repellent. He smelt like Tomas, a blend of minerals and wet grass. His face was no longer shadowed and ugly but mysterious and full of character. His skin was icy to touch. He teased my lips open with his, as my teeth nipped his bottom lip. He growled, and I responded with ferocity to equal his. I stood on my tip-toes to reach his mouth, press myself against him. Sliding his hands beneath my thighs he hoisted me up and pushed me against the wall. It was then my glamour dropped and my wings spread and curled down as I sought his mouth again. His cold tongue slipped between my lips and stroked mine. Then his fangs ran out and sliced by bottom lip open. He jerked back, but it healed almost instantly.

I ran my tongue over my lips and smirked. “I’m not as breakable as I look.” I said.

He chuckled darkly. I found myself not afraid, but intrigued and I licked the sharp tips of his fangs. He groaned. Was it me? The feral and demanding girl with her legs locked round a vampire-boy’s waist, digging my hands into his shoulders, dragging him closer.

The kiss deepened and I clung onto him, one hand fisted in his hair and the other roving across the nape of his neck. Tomas pushed

forward, securing me into his solid frame, and ran his hands down my sides. My skin was on fire, my blood boiling. He broke away to trail kisses down my neck then was still, holding me. Both our chests heaved. I realized he was hot, hard and had his mouth at my throat.

He swallowed loudly then slowly, deliberately kissed my wildly jumping pulse, and leaned away.

We locked eyes again. I figured the look of shock and confusion must have been mirrored on my face. I so had no expected that. The biting, sure, that was bound to happen some time or another, but a kiss that flooded every vein in my body with fire? When did that become a possibility? Oh gods, what have I done?

“That was-”

“Different,” I said and swallowed.

“This is not normal, Rae. My kind and your kind do not mix.” His eyes travelled over my wings. He did not look repulsed but intrigued.

“I didn’t expect I mean, I’m sorry if I have upset you.” He reached out and stroked my wingtip. I felt the caress down to my toes. “Oh,” I breathed.

He nuzzled me and whispered in my ear, “I am not upset.”

“I’m glad because I…” I blushed. “I liked it.”

“You feel good to me too, but what shall we do now?” My legs were still around his waist, and the wall supported my back leaving his and my hands free. His wandered to the edge of my jumper, then swiftly pulled it over my head.

My face felt hot. Never had I been kissed like that before. Or treated like this. Breandan had been my first kiss and it had felt wonderful. But my second from this vampire had felt oh, it hadn’t felt as nice as what his hands where doing now. “That feels-” I sucked in a breath and my eyes fell to the body of the Lady Cleric. All the blood left my face and my eyes twitched back to his.

“Good?” he finished for me and raised an eyebrow.

He raised his head to kiss my neck and I couldn’t help it, I arced myself into him.

There was a gush of air as the door crashed open. Splinters of woods flew like daggers and embedded into the wall around us. Breandan thundered into the room and launched himself at Tomas, knocking me to the side as he did so. They smashed through the wall and were lost to my sight.

I was curled into a small ball and reality was suspended. I found it hard to breathe right, my chest still felt too tight from the emotions that had overwhelmed me during Tomas's embrace. I waited but the hole in the wall remained, letting me see the night sky. I was feeling overwhelmed but it helped centre me. It was all so much it made me step outside myself and take control. The snarling, growling noises where getting louder. I rolled up, darted forward and looked down, carefully leaning on a patch of wall that looked solid.

Tomas and Breandan rolled around in the grass like two fools, but two fools with dangerous weapons. Breandan straddled Tomas, a shard of wood in his hand. The tendons on his arm and neck were bulging, and the deadly point of the wood was a mere jerk away from spearing Tomas in the chest. My vampire-boy was on red alert. He looked menacing with his fangs fully on display and his eyes glazed black; nostril's flared. Snarling up a storm his mouth snapped for Breandan's neck.

I grabbed my jumper off the floor and dropped through the hole. As I landed my already abused ankle twisted, and I dropped like a stone. Why it had not healed?

My emotions were wide open, and wildness seeped from Breandan's nature to mine. It rubbed me up the wrong way, and I found myself unable to stop the fight, because I was battling the more carnal of my urges. It was telling me a threat, a vampire was close and to attack. The conflicting feelings of hate and lust I felt for Tomas had my stomach in knots.

"Calm down," I said through my teeth, and staggered up. "Breandan, look at me."

He didn't look, but his ears twitched and I knew he was listening. First I was going to try and talk him out of trying to stake my vampire then I was going to tear him apart.

I could hear voices around the corner. The noise of them busting through a brick wall had been loud and messy. We had woken the building up and it was only a matter of time before confusion made

way for ruthless order. Three floors up there was a ragged hole in the side of my building leading into my room. There was no way I'd even be able to hide it. It had demon stamped all over it. The Clerics were going to piece it all together, and that would be it for me. The Clerics would come and find us. In fact, Lord Cleric Tu was probably up there with the body of his dead partner. He would know it was me in the forest. He would know somehow I had gotten demons past the Wall, and into the Temple. All of this passed through my mind in less than the time it took me to glance up at the hole then glare at Breandan, since he was still on Tomas like white on rice.

He turned his head to look at me, and his expression was wary. Damn right it should be. I was beyond pissed.

"I should have known," he said to me. "I smelt him on you, but I thought I was wrong." I was going to have to start taking many more showers if it was that easy to figure out who'd I'd been with by a lingering smell. His eyes roamed the space, for he could hear the voices too then came back to Tomas. "You are mine, not a dead things snack," he hissed.

He hadn't seen the kiss. He thought Tomas was about to bite me. Well, I didn't know if I should tell him he had it all wrong, or to leave it alone. Correcting him would bring up questions as to why I was pressed up against the wall with the vampire-boy all in my space with his fangs out.

Tomas didn't say anything. He watched me. His gaze felt heavy and as I looked into his eyes I whispered, "I want him alive." Breandan made a short noise of impatience and I raised my voice. "Get off him. Now."

"I do not know what he has done to make you feel like you have to help him, but you must see he is-"

"You killed her!"

I spun round at the anguished yell.

Cleric Tu was red in the face and it looked like he had been crying. He clutched a metal rod in his hand. I remembered the drained body of the Lady Cleric and wondered how close they had been. Had Tomas killed his love?

Breandan slid off Tomas and hauled him up with one arm, moving so fast they both blurred. Tomas and Breandan stared at each other, not a foot away. Tomas looked pointedly at Tu and Breandan shook his

head.

“We have no choice,” Tomas said curtly. “He’s seen her.”

My head swung between them, trying to figure it out what they were discussing. What choice was there to make?

Cleric Tu lunged at Breandan. Tomas was suddenly beside me, snarling. Eyes pitch black and fanged face scary as death, but he wasn’t the reason fear gripped me hard and had the breath whooshing from my lungs. Breandan was losing. How such a thing was possible was beyond my comprehension, but his movement was slow and his reactions sluggish. Each time the pole came near him he shied away. Tu lunged forward again, thrusting with the rod at Breandan’s torso. Instead of a thump to the stomach the pole kept going, slicing through flesh, and burying itself in Breandan’s stomach. Silence. Tu let go of the pole and staggered back, face slack with shock.

Staring at the metal protruding from his body, Breandan went pale and said, “Oh no.” Then he crumpled.

Tomas snarled, and stepped forward menacingly toward the Cleric, who jumped then legged it back round the building.

I scrambled over to Breandan, and fell to my knees beside him. He was unconscious. I took a deep breath and let my eyes roam down to collide with the stubby length of metal sticking out of his abdomen. There was so much blood. Body propped off the ground, the shard of metal had punched straight through him.

“Rae, we must leave.” Disorientated by intense dread, Tomas’s freaky silent vampire movement made me jump.

“Say-so,” I said. “We leave, but I have to help him first.”

“He is finished, I smell the iron.” He went to place a hand on my shoulder, but I ducked from beneath his touch.

“No,” I said and bared my teeth at him in a snarl. He snarled back and it was a much more impressive showing than mine. It shocked me out of it. I fixed my face, and pleaded for understanding with my eyes instead. “I’m staying because, I can’t I can’t do this, Tomas. I cannot leave or watch him-” My head swung from side to side jerkily. “We heal but it has to come out.”

Placing my hand on the metal rod the instant sting made me hiss. I

snatched my hand back. Opening my palm the flesh sizzled where glass had cut me open. Huh?

A cool hand landed on my shoulder. “Listen to reason. I know you feel-”

“You don’t know shit,” I screeched. “Help me. Help me, or get out my way.”

Gripping the pole again all my strength zapped away. What? I just didn’t get it. Was there an enchantment on it? The metal stung my hands until I had no choice but to release it. Breandan’s hot blood trickled from his body, seeped onto the ground in a growing puddle. Pooling around knees, it soaked my jeans.

Tomas’s shoulder shunted me to the side. “Give me room.”

Face grim, his fingers flitted over Breandan and his nostrils flared. His inch long fangs were fully extended and dangerous looking, telling me he was still hyped up; bloodlusty, but his eyes had cleared to deep brown. A nasty gash he’d gotten across his forehead when he’d crashed through the wall had closed up to leave nothing but a smear of blood on his ashen skin. “He needs healing. Heal him.”

“I don’t know how.”

I pressed my hand onto Breandan’s arm, needing to feel connected. His skin was cold. I squeezed, but there was no response to comfort. How could he do this, leave me now I needed him? I didn’t know what to do. I had been too self-absorbed, and wrapped in my own problems to ask what I should do if a situation like this ever occurred. What was I going to do without him? A fire built in my belly. He had released all this power within me and now he was going to leave me?

“You will not die,” I said fiercely, not sure why I reached to the Source as I said the words, simply that I did.

It flowed into me like molten lava and wrapped around my heart. Hot pain shot up my arm from Breandan into my stomach. Wavering on my knees, my head took flight as magic ran riot through my body. With nowhere to channel it I locked it inside me. One hand clutched at my abdomen the other kept its death grip on Breandan’s arm; no way was I ever letting go of him.

“Are you hurt?” Tomas ran his eyes over my body.

“We need to get away from here.”

“If you insist on saving this worthless fairy’s life, I will have to carry him.”

I sank my teeth into my lip, thinking. Breandan would not be happy with this. “But where do we go? I have nowhere else. This is my home, and I have no family, and no friends apart from Alex, who lives here.”

“We don’t need to go anywhere in particular. Into the forest will do. You fairies are most powerful there.”

He added nothing else to this impromptu plan prompting me to say, “Then what?”

“Hope you can learn to call to your kind, or hope they find us before he dies.” He picked Breandan up and threw him over his shoulder. “Follow me, and don’t fall behind.”

He ran and I followed behind, trying to keep pace. I was tired, and after less than a few minutes started to slow. Tomas pressed a trying pace through the night. Even when I did fall too far behind, he was easy to find. The metal pole pointed up and out like a mast from Breandan’s limp body. The hood of my now holey sweatshirt was up to shield against the cold, but it flew off my head as Tomas jumped over the Temple wall and I followed. I didn’t think how impossible it was, I just did it, pushed off and soared over. Landing was loud affair with much grunting and gasping. We reached the edge of the region and he stopped just before the buzzing red wires of the Wall.

“We need an exit,” he said and looked at me.

I gasped for breath. I bent over to rest my hands on my knees. “I can’t,” I sobbed. “I’m too tired.”

He grabbed my arm and dragged me forward. Now he was mad. “This was your choice, I’m hungry, and I carry this fairy for you.”

He shook me roughly then let me go.

I gritted my teeth and focused. My mouth was dry from nerves as I reached out and drew on the Source. It flooded me, but I was not strong enough to control the energy eager to be free. I felt something within me give, a thread snapping. I lost my concentration. The fence pinged and unraveled, but the power whiplashed out to slice through

a tree a few feet to my side. There was a loud snap and groan. It toppled forward, and I was too shocked to do anything but stare at it.

Tomas grabbed my arm again and dragged me through the hole in the Wall as the tree smashed to the ground. The boughs sizzled and sparked as they came into contact with the electrically charged wires. The klaxon started to blare in the distance. Tomas kept his grip on my arm and dragged me behind him, supporting all my weight when my feet failed me. When I was well enough to continue on my own, I wriggled out of his grasp and he started to run again.

Soon, we ghosted through a deserted city. Every street corner had me on edge, wary of every shadow and noise. I had not walked a town beyond the Wall in my life, and I gazed at the derelict buildings, disbelieving that humans once lived in such grand structures. One I will forever remember was so magnificent; I strained my neck to see behind me as we passed. It was a gargantuan clock tower, connected to a lengthy building. The glass windows had long been shattered to nothing, but I imagined them whole, glinting in the sunlight. I had heard the stories of it, the place near the river, where the rulers of this region used to meet. A great bell would chime every hour to remind people of the time. After a while, it faded into the background and I turned my attention back to my immediate surroundings. The streets looked like something from a nightmare. Blood stains; black from age, was smeared on the pavements and pooled where bodies used to lie. Doors hung from hinges, windows were smashed and jagged pieces of glass littered the road. Swarms of bloated rats scurried away as we passed, their black beady eyes reflecting the weak moonlight. Burnt out cars were rusted and overturned, or abandoned on the roadside, doors still open. Trees sprouted from the buildings and knee high blade grass cut into our shins. Piles of rubble and destruction blocking the way were easily jumped and climbed over. There were no bodies, just crumbling brick and pitted stone and twisted metal.

Was this it? Was this the hell-hole in which we died? I remembered Ana's prediction then tossed my head irritably. No, this wasn't it. Orchard was a fairy wyld not a deserted human city.

The situation was beyond crazy and all I could think was what next? If only I had gotten back sooner. Tomas wouldn't have been so hungry and maybe Breandan would have paused before trying to stake him. Pushing the hair out of my eyes, I sneezed at the dust floating down my fingers dislodged. I had underestimated the Clerics and it was a mistake I would never make again.

We passed the city and Tomas stopped. I thanked the gods, for my legs were shaking with exhaustion.

“Rae,” Tomas said. “You will hear me now.”

I stared at him. “Do I really need to tell you know is not the time?”

Tomas lay Breandan down, rather gently all things considered. “Once you have called to the fairies it might be too late.”

I was exasperated. “Why?”

“They may kill me before you can stop them. I must try to make you agree.”

I smacked myself upside the head. This was not going to be good. “You never said I would have to agree to anything.”

“It is a choice you have to make.”

Time was of the essence here, but he was right. I had promised to hear him out, and calling trigger-happy fairies in beforehand would not be so clever. I breathed out through my nose and looked him in the eye.

“What the hell do you want from me?”

“I’m dying,” he said.

Chapter Eight

It was a statement of a lifetime, and my mouth fell open.

“But, you’re immortal,” I said, as if that would explain everything.

“We’re dying, all vampires and we have been for a while. There are few of us left.” Sadness briefly flitted across his face. “We’re starving,” he told me. “The nest I belong to is small, but one struggling to hold onto some form of dignity. Many of my kind have been reduced to senseless cannibals who would just as likely drain another vampire as a human. They have fallen to the madness of the dark.”

This was big. Huge. I didn’t know how to begin to respond. I decided to be polite but frank.

“Tomas, I’m sad for you, but I don’t see how this could have lead to you to me.”

“You know vampires used to be human.”

“No, you used to be pussycats.” I made a noise of frustration. “We don’t have time for this.”

He held a pale palm up. “You listen, or I won’t help you.”

Tomas had saved my life from the Lady Cleric. He had helped Breandan and me escape from the Temple at a risk to himself. Surely I could hear him out like I promised. I mashed my fisted hands into my side.

“Go on,” I huffed, bad naturedly.

“We used to be human, but changed and became vampire. We are not infectious. I cannot turn you; I am what I am because of genetics. Just like shifters are born human then discover the ability to change form, we too are born human and change at some significant point in our lives.”

“You mean, you’re not dead?”

He did one of those fast and annoyed movements with his hand. “Yes. My human body died.”

That explained a lot. “Oh, well, um sorry about that.” It was an

awkward moment for me, though Tomas seemed at ease. I talked over it, “But that does not explain why you’re dying.”

“What do we eat?”

“Blood.”

“Yes. Where do we get blood?”

I tapped my foot and rolled my eyes. He was leading me somewhere and was opting for the prolonged and dramatic route instead of spitting it out. “You drink from humans.”

“Where do the survivors of the humankind live?”

I stared at him like he was dumb. “Uh, behind the Wall-”

It hit me between the eyes like a flying brick. Vampirekind had lost their food source. During the Rupture the demons, vampires in particular, had all but made humans extinct. Now they were paying the price for the humans had locked themselves away from the rest of the world.

“You see,” he said. “We are starving. Some humans are gifted in magics and become witches. There were some vampires who could touch the Source before they turned, and we have such a one in the nest I was born into, gifted with the Sight. She saw you in my future, though she never said anything about the blood we have shared. You are the key to my survival.” He touched a cold hand to my lips. “Rae, you will save me.”

Oh gods. I opened my mouth then closed it again. I forgot what he was and prodded him in the chest. “You didn’t think to tell me this earlier?”

“I told you it was important.”

“No,” I hissed.

“You said yourself. I took a great risk diving through the Wall so I could meet you. I’d been trying for a month. I have fairies hunting me. I slept in a wardrobe. Of course what I have to tell you is important.”

“Well yeah, but I figured you were going to spew some vampire crap about some bad vampire hurting lots of good vampires, and that maybe you wanted me to get the fairies to help. I didn’t realize it

would be something as huge as saving your life. The gods damn it, Tomas."

"What will you do now?"

"Figure out how to call a fairy to come fix Breandan."

"Good idea. He does not have much time left." He sounded positively happy at the idea. I glowered at him at he smiled. It was not a beautiful smile, but one of charm and my lip twitched. "Will you call to someone in particular?"

I thought about it. "I've only met one other fairy and he knew loads. Breandan trusts him. He'll have to do."

I closed my eyes. Time passed and nothing happened. I rubbed my temples and resisted the urge to hum.

Tomas sniffed the air. "No magic?"

I shifted on the spot then sat down. Folding my legs beneath me I closed my eyes again. "I haven't touched the Source yet. I wascentering myself."

Lie, lie, lie. I was trying to figure out what the hell to do next, because I had no clue what I was doing. After a few minutes I still had done nothing. I didn't want to call on the Source because I didn't know what to do with it, and I didn't want to make anything bad happen. There was no conscious fairy nearby to fix my mistakes. Urgh.

Tomas sat behind me and pulled me onto his lap. I stiffened and my eyes opened. He reclined against a tree, pulling me with him.

"You need to calm down," he said. I looked over at Breandan, who rested so still a few paces away. I could barely hear him breathe, and I was expected to be calm? Tomas placed both hands either side of my face. They were cold, and felt wonderful against my warm cheeks. He sighed. "Relax, and do what you need to do."

With no more time to lose, I closed my eyes and gasped as pure, blistering energy filled me the instant I reached to the Source. I was learning intense anger or fear helped to focus my mind. I drifted from my body, and sought out the memory I instinctively knew would help me find Conall. Suddenly he was there, aware of me and I locked onto the tenor of his mind like a homing beacon. I reached my hand to touch.

“Conall,” I said and he whirled round. “Conall,” I called louder. The energy felt like a thrashing rope, crackling and fighting my control. “I need you, can you feel where I am? Find me.”

Exhausted, I sobbed and snapped back into my own mind. I slouched backward and the forest canopy swung into view. Tomas caught me and rested me on the leaf-strewn floor next to him.

“Did it work?” he asked close to my ear. “Keep your eyes open, Rae. Did it work?”

Sighing, I didn’t have the energy to shrug. “I’m tired,” I said.

“Rest then. I will watch over you.”

I stared up at him. His face was already so dear to me. How could that be? He was not my kind; he wasn’t’ even human. Vampires were cold and deadly, and Tomas would have probably killed me if he had crossed my path in any other circumstance. What would I do when Breandan woke? Did I tell him about the kiss that set my heart on fire? Did I tell him the darkness that enveloped Tomas was now my darkness to? I sighed.

Maybe it would be best if I closed my eyes and never opened them again. Life was too complicated. I felt strongly for Breandan. When I was with him here was no one else. But it was the same with Tomas. Oh gods what was I going to do?

Then pain sliced through everything. Breandan was getting worse, much worse. Gulping air, I focused on the shiny space in front of me rather than how difficult it was to breathe. My heart pumped hard and tried to punch through my chest. I clutched at it and squeezed, hoping the pressure would help. It sped up. There was a distant keening in my ears. It tasted like someone had just shoved a fist full of metal into my mouth. Faint, but growing louder was sound of my heartbeat. My vision blinkered, and my heart slowed enough to feel comfortable. A cloying numbness seeped through my limbs, and the darkness hovering at the edge of my vision looked inviting, sweet. I turned to embrace it and float within its cool nothingness.

Someone dragged me backward, away from the painless dark to the murky surface of consciousness. I felt irritation. Who was taking me away from the peace of the dark? A low buzzing grew louder and louder, until I could distinguish words. My eyes flickered open. Tomas had my head clasped in his hands, and his eyes were focused on mine. His hands, clothes and skin were soaked in blood. Of course, only he

would drag me back from bliss to painful reality.

“You are bleeding,” he said. “But there is no wound. It seeps through your skin.”

I was startled to see my top pushed up to expose my midriff. Blood gushed to the ground in a dark puddle beneath me. My blood, the source of the gushing blood was me. I went to speak, but the metallic taste of blood silenced me. Should there be so much in my mouth? Looking down the body I once saw as strong, I could barely move. In the low glow of the moonlight from above, my skin was pale. My tail limply flickered on the ground, and my wings were spread and crumpled, they fluttered uselessly at my sides. I doubted it was a good look for me.

“You’re still hungry,” I said practically.

Tomas’s dark eyes bored into mine. “I am fine.”

“You said you were hungry, and it’s just going to waste. You need to be strong and quick in case Conall doesn’t listen. Just don’t bite me, okay.”

After a few moments, I giggled. I was dying and there was a vampire licking blood of my stomach. Tomas stopped, and his blood smeared face peered at me with interest. The world blurred at the edges. My lungs forced me to suck in air in shallow pants, but they couldn’t fill.

A faint buzzing drew my attention. “that is enough for me,” Tomas said and leaned forward, slowly, to brush his mouth against mine. His tongue licked over my lips and they parted. He tasted salty, like blood.

I tried to smile, to show that I liked him kissing me, but it was lopsided and brief. “I’ll b-bet you never had this in mind when you came t-to find me. So far, all I’ve done is g-get you into t-t-trouble.” I shivered and felt goose bumps pop up all over me. Tomas frowned then shifted away, and started to rub my arms and legs. His hands moved so fast they blurred.

After a while, when I stopped shaking, he stopped and pulled me closer. He touched my ears and grinned, all toothy. “I find I want you to live, Rae. I want-”

A fierce roar brought my head swinging round to see a giant rushing forward, sword unsheathed and glinting in the moonlight. He weaved through the trees like a ghostly phantom, and was heading straight for

us. Another phantom was close behind him, Conall. His own weapon was drawn and he leaped forward with a guttural cry when his eyes locked on Tomas. The world slowed to a torturous pace.

My throat was on fire but I breathed a faint, “No.” Just in time before the pressure of my emotions heightening caused more pain, and my voice cut off.

Slamming to a stop, Conall’s demeanor switched from death incarnate to wary so quickly, I wondered if I’d started hallucinating. My vampire-boy crouched in front of me and snarled so fiercely I was afraid to place my hand on him as I staggered up, and draped myself over him.

“Not him,” I mumbled. “He helped me.”

Tomas’s hands were scrunched into claws, and his body was statue still with either fear or rage. He shuffled back and kept me with him. To get to Tomas, the fairy-man would have to either hurt me, or haul me out the way. His sword swung high. It looked like he was opting for decapitation.

Conall cried out, “Not her.”

The giant halted to complete stillness, and his sword arm dropped. He breathed in deeply, and his face smoothed from a snarl into a composed mask of cool indifference. “Peace,” he said, voice booming and clutched his sword at the ready.

The pointed ears and radiant features named the giant as a fairy-man. A magnificent mane of blonde of his hair rippled down to his bare shoulders and his face was hard and strong. Most arresting was that he had one blue eye and one green eye. He made a short, commanding noise at Conall, who bowed his head meekly. Then he headed straight for Breandan, and knelt down to touch his chest. His brow furrowed and he murmured something too quietly for me to hear. He stopped halfway and turned his head to fix his blue eye on me.

I shrank away from the steely glare, for some reason ashamed.

Tomas was tightly wound. Fangs fully extended, eyes glazed over black and nostrils flared. So large and dark were his eyes they made his skin paler, absorbing the moonlight to radiate outwards. It was peculiar to see an immortal react with such fear. If you didn’t have a stake around the only other thing that could kill a vampire was fire. Or decapitation, but that worked on pretty much every being.

Swallowing the bitter taste at the back of my throat, I ignored nausea in the pit off my stomach. My eyes scanned Conall's face, looking for the kindly fairy I knew within this monstrous warrior. Incomprehension was followed by anger at his expression. His eyes flicked across Tomas with distaste, and in them I saw death. His searching eyes met mine and his face filled with pain.

"Conall," I said softly. My knees trembled. "You came. You heard me."

He sheathed his sword in one fluid motion and rushed to my side.

Tomas disentangled himself and stepped away from me. The darkness that surrounded him, and me, wobbled then retreated. Suddenly he was no longer so accessible to me. The familiarity was gone, but there was something still tying me to him, a poignant memory of the dark.

Conall narrowed his eyes to slits and looked at the space surrounding me. Could he see the darkness? Mouth pulled into a grim line he eased me onto the floor and tried to make me comfortable, gently moving my wings. I gritted my teeth at the sharp forks of pain that shot down my right pinion. My body was battered and I was not healing.

"What has happened here?" he asked and eyed Tomas with distaste.

"I wish I knew. I did something with magic and I can't say it was one of my brighter ideas. It hurts like hell."

He stared at me hard. Then he snorted. "You have shared your life with Breandan, but you are not strong enough to sustain it."

I had? I nodded weakly and my attention shifted to what the fairy-man was doing with my fairy-boy. He winced at the pole and gingerly avoided touching it.

"It is iron," he rumbled.

"Who are you?" I asked. When he did not answer, the corners of my mouth pulled down but with no time to go into the specifics of good manners, I turned to Conall, "We don't like iron?"

"It drains our strength and is poison to us. It burns." He paused and made a small waving gesture with his hand, as if brushing off an errant thought. "There are stories of iron-working fairies, but such a one is rare. I have never met one in my lifetime."

I remembered how weak I had felt when I touched it, how all my

energy had drained away. Then I remembered the sizzling of flesh when Cleric Tu had cut Maeve's face. Iron drained our strength, and burned us when it touched an open wound. How quickly would we die if it was to be stabbed into us, and was there any other material that affected us so? I shuddered for the thought was hideous.

"I want you to be honest with me, I'm not too late? I mean, you can save Breandan?"

He nodded, hesitantly. "I will try, but I do not think you will like me for being able to soon." He smiled. "I did not teach you to call to another, you taught yourself?"

I grinned back at him, proud. "All I need was to be calm and focused."

My eyes darted to Tomas. I could not have done it without him.

The world blacked out, a scary thing to happen with your eyes wide open, blood pooling around you and your failing heartbeat thumping in your ears. A sweep of cold brought me to. Tomas's hand was leaving my forehead.

Conall smacked his hand away. Hissed. "Watch yourself," he said.

Tomas tried to touch me again with the same result. "Touch me again and you'll lose that hand, fairy," he growled and rolled onto his haunches.

I couldn't bear it if they started fighting. The importance of the moment held fast I opened my mouth. "Please stop."

All eyes snapped to my face.

The fairy-man stood, and lifted his chin at Conall, before glaring at me again. I took in the hard angles of his face, and the blue eye that held the warmth of a glacier, not that the green was anymore soothing. The proud set of his mouth, the shape of his jaw was so familiar I could reach out, close my eyes and map the dimensions.

"You should not be here," Conall said to Tomas and firmly pressed down on my chest wound. I barely felt the pressure of his hand.

The numbness was back, a light, seeping sensation that flowed steadily over me.

"I would rather face the sun then watch what is about to happen, but I

cannot leave."

My mouth dried up. Sweat beaded my brow and ran down my temples. "What shouldn't he see?" I asked Conall in a small voice.

"Are you sure you wish for me to do this?" he asked the fairy-man, ignoring me.

He sniffed and crossed his arms across his bared chest. The muscles in his arms rippled. "You are better at healing than I. I want him whole so I can tear him apart myself."

Conall fell silent, the corner of his mouth curving up. Kneeling between Breandan and I, holding a hand over each our brows and chanted something rhythmic and urgent. The life in the forest was suspended. I sensed it was going to happen, that big pain that made you sick just to think of it. I was feeling everything Breandan felt. I'd bound my body to him and now I was dying alongside him. They were going to pull the iron pole out of Breandan and it was going to hurt. A lot. He was unconscious. I was not.

"Don't let them," I whispered.

Tomas could hear me, of course, but he was focused hard on the middle distance. I tried to yank on his arm but my fingers merely brushed his skin.

He looked down at me. His eyes burned against his stark white skin. "It'll only hurt for a little while," he said.

I stared at him. He was not going to help me.

"Take your hands off me. Let me go right now." I wiggled with renewed vigor fed by fear, and all I could do is kick the air. "Please don't hurt me anymore."

Tomas's heavy hands held my shoulders down.

The fairy-man gripped the iron pole. My stomach dropped and my heart leaped into my throat. I felt the blood drain from my head.

I screamed, "Don't!"

He cried out something harshly as he yanked the iron from Breandan's chest. My torso jerked violently. My eyes bulged and tried to escape their sockets. Stomach squeezing into nothing every muscle in my

body clenched. My insides wrenched, and my heart just - stopped. Tomas held my thrashing body by the shoulders, pushing me down onto the damp, mossy floor. Conall spun round, took Breandan's head in both hands and roared. The sound was deep, vex and violent. Breandan's back contorted, arced off the floor. Writhing in agony a silent screech of pain deformed his expression. He convulsed then became languid.

Conall slumped, pressing his head on the ground.

The pain released me, and the absence of hurt was stark. I curled into a ball. Peering into Tomas's face, remarkably, my thoughts were clear and focused. I had survived the ordeal and it had felt like the end. What would have happened to Breandan?

"The next words coming out of your mouth need to be telling me he's okay," I said.

He glanced over her shoulder. There was a beat where he stilled and everything around me disintegrated but then, he breathed out and nodded. "He lives," he said and slid back.

I craned my neck to see around him, and for a moment all I could see was the broad back of the fairy-man, huddled over and blocking Breandan from my sight. Hissing in anger, I surged onto all fours. And then he shifted to the side, holding Breandan by the arm. He said something close to Breandan's ear, and my fairy-boy started, looked around wildly before our gazes locked.

I crawled forward, the effort sweetly painful. The closer I got the brighter his skin glowed. I sprung up, stumbled, and slid on a branch. Legs wobbling my tail twitched madly. The glow of Breandan's skin increased. He sat on his knees swaying; opening out his arms his face brimmed with emotion as I fell into them. The moment he clutched me I pressed my eyes closed at the brilliant light that blasted from our joined bodies, and the power that flowed through me was hot and eager. It flared, rubbing at my nature until I found myself digging my fingers into Breandan's back for fear it would sweep me away.

A startled yell echoed into the trees, and a flock of nesting birds took off into the sky. The energy drained, the light cut off and it was dark. I opened my eyes, and as my vision corrected itself I blinked to help it along.

My gaze travelled down to see someone sprawled on the floor. Tomas, whorls of sweet smelling smoke emanated rising from his body, was

face up and motionless. I jerked from Breandan's grip and crawled toward him. Opening his eyes he groaned. I stopped, wary. Lightening patches on his ivory skin healed as he jumped up and wobbled unsteadily. He scowled, plainly troubled at his own lack of dexterity. He saw me, half reaching out to him and half holding back.

"I'll need to feed again," he said quietly.

My heart back flipped in my chest. I had a flash of memory, his fangs sinking into my flesh and shivered.

"Then do not let us keep you," said the fairy-man before I could answer.

Tomas's gaze twitched from mine, and he bowed his head in a show of respect. "The girl and I have personal business to attend to," he said with more than a hint of ownership in his voice. "I cannot leave."

The fairy-man returned the gesture though his mouth pressed into a thin line and a vein in his neck bulged. "Whatever debt she owes you for your help will be paid. You have my word, but you cannot come where we are to go."

I studied his face and wondered who he was. Clearly he was an oath-sworn rebel, to have come with Conall. He couldn't be older than his mid twenties in human years, making him ancient as a fairy. He felt dangerous, vicious. In comparison Conall's presence was timid.

"You know boy-vampire," he continued. "When a fairy speaks it can only speak the truth."

I blinked at that. I'd lied out of my ass a thousand times before.

"Yes, I know this. Just as I know Rae will do her best to return to me."

I felt my face flush and my heart thump too hard. He was standing up for me, and I liked that he had such a high opinion.

Breandan tipped my face to his and peered at me. I avoided his eyes.

"Let's go," he said. He released me and stood, slowly, nodding his head at Conall to say thank you. The fairies drifted a few paces away then waited for me.

Tomas and I stared at each other. We had been through so much together in so short a time. To be parted from him would hurt me, I

was sure of it.

He saw my confusion. “Go with your kind,” he said.

I stood, and rubbed my hands on my thighs. I avoided looking at him. “Where will you go?”

“Back to my nest.”

“Uh, you’ll be okay? I mean, you’ll make it back there with no problems? I’d hate for anything toit’s just I don’t like the idea of ” Gods, it was pathetic. Why could I not just spit it out?

He stepped closer. “You owe me,” he said in a low voice.

“I’ll see you again, and pay my debt. I promise.” A bird screeched nearby and I looked to the east. I frowned, worried. The sky was getting much lighter. “You’ll need to find a dark place.”

He reached for my hand. “A safe place.”

“Rae,” Breandan called. “Come now.”

Tomas stopped reaching for my hand, and instead leaned forward to whisper into my ear, “I’ll find you.”

He blended into the shadows and was gone. There was a peculiar feeling on my mouth. I pressed my hand to my lips and they were cold, plumping back up as if they had given under pressure.

When I turned round, Conall beckoned to me with a grin, and took off behind the fairy-man. Breandan waited for me then we ran too. My thoughts lingered on Tomas. Our goodbye had felt wrong. Incomplete.

Breandan ran for a long time without saying a word and that was fine by me. He kept sneaking looks my way. Opening then closing his mouth. Sighing. He said, “Will you explain why I feel a connection between you and the vampire?”

“No,” I said simply. “It’s separate, from us and not something I can discuss with you.”

He didn’t like that. He darted in front of me and pushed me back by the shoulder. It was not meant to hurt me, or knock me down, but in his anger he went to far. I tried to swing the force from falling to my advantage, and roll back up, but I was not nearly skilled enough. I hit the floor face first, and spat a leaf out of my mouth. Huh. Looked like

we were going to have it out right there and then. I had wanted to give him some time, since he'd only just been brought back from the brink of death, but clearly he had something to get off his chest. Getting annoyed at his high-handedness would get me nowhere. We'd been here before too, him pulling and chucking me around like I was unbreakable.

I stood up and faced him. "What do you remember?" I asked shortly. "After the explosion what do you remember?"

He paused, eyes far away. A spasm rippled across his features as his eyes flicked to me. "There was pain in my stomach and my strength was gone. The pain was from iron." He shuddered. "I heard you call to me but I could not answer then there was darkness."

"That's it?"

"Then, there was more pain. Mine and yours." His eyes sparked anger. "You shared all you are to keep me alive. Do not do it again."

"No," I said and looked him in the eye. "I know my own mind, I can-"

"-take care of myself," he finished. He sighed and looked away, eyes becoming unfocused. His brows mashed together. I didn't like how it scrunched his eyes and smoothed out the furrows. "Conall healed me," he continued. "It was unpleasant. Then there was only you. You glowed like the sun." His face had taken on a look of awe.

I shook my head; worried he got it wrong. "Not me," I corrected. "You glowed, not me."

His eyes softened. "Trust me, your light is like no other. I woke to find you whole. Close to me."

He smiled and I blinked. His teeth were sharper than normal teeth, fang-like. Even shown in a smile they were scary. I ran my tongue around my mouth and corrected myself. Our teeth were fang-like.

"You want me to fill in the blanks?" He nodded. I thought about how best to break everything to him. "You want the good or the bad first?"

"I am aware the vampire has fed from you." His jaw was tight with distaste. "He attacked you?"

My anger had cooled down some, and I hesitated. I took my worry out on my bottom lip. "Tomas saved me," I said slowly, knowing his pride

was going to swell and shatter the peace. “He saved you.

He stiffened. “No.”

“You owe him your life.”

“I owe that scavenger nothing.”

“You’re not thinking clearly. You’re seeing things warped by jealousy.”

“Jealousy.” His face was incredulous. “I am not jealous of that-”

I put my hands over my ears. “Don’t.”

His body quaked with repressed anger as he struggled to contain his reaction. “You and I are bonded. Do you understand what that means?” Teeth clamped together his words sounded short and punchy.

“Yes, and I accept it.”

“Then how could you do this?” He roared. “You hid the monster the we tried to protect you from, the monster that killed my sister.”

Eyes wide, I shook my head. “No,” I said and sucked in a breath. “Breandan, you can’t blame him for something he had no part in.”

“His scent was all over the forest. We found a pool of Maeve’s blood and nothing else makes sense.”

He needed to know the truth. If not he would hunt Tomas, and I couldn’t have that.

“I never lied to you, but I never told you the truth,” I said and swallowed hard. “I’m not good, y’know, and I never pretended to be. Maeve,” I said, coming round to the point. “She’s dead and I watched her die.” The words tumbled into the empty air and hung heavy. Remnants of confusion drained from Breandan’s face, leaving a mask of pure horror, and the expression was horrible to see. I cast my gaze down to the floor. “This morning, when you found me, I was running from the Clerics that killed her. I found them torturing her. She saw me, even in the dark and she told me to run.” Evidence of my pain streamed down my cheeks and ran into my mouth. “It’s my fault. They shot her, and it’s my fault.”

“No. My fault.” He scrapped a hand over his face, eyes burning. “Maeve was there because I was obsessed with keeping you safe. She

was too young for such a charge, to guard you, but she is so stubborn and persistent and I-"

His face crumpled, his body was racked with a sob.

"I'm sorry," I said and reached to touch him.

He flinched so hard it shocked me to still. Growling darkly, he backed away from me. The silence stretched on and on and on, and I thought I would drown in the hurt in his eyes

I scrubbed at my cheeks. "Please," I whispered. "Please, understand why I couldn't tell you. I was afraid. You were this strange demon and I was lost. You were showing me the way back to safety. If I told you what had happened you know you would have done something regrettable."

His fingers curled into claws and a wild look twisted his face. "You knew how I worried, and you knew she was my sister. You, said, nothing."

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, to explain but there were no words. What I had done was selfish and cruel. I was a coward. I reached out to him again and he knocked my hand away. He paced before striding up to me and clamping his hands down on my arms. He stared into my face and squeezed me until I thought my bones would break. Instinct took over. I pulled my lips back to bare my teeth as a hiss rumbled out of my throat. I held my ground until his face fell into some semblance of human again. Storm clouds rolled in Breandan's eyes and lighting flashed in mine, but then the desire to fight him drained. I was left empty. His eyes widened, realizing his grip was hurting me, and he dropped my arms as if contact with me would infect him.

"You break my heart," he said and clenched his fists, looking up at the dark tree canopy. He took a series of short, sharp breaths, and when he looked at me he was composed. "We don't have time to waste bickering. Let's go."

"I want to talk. To explain."

He turned away. "Must you fight me on everything?"

"Now you understand that Tomas had nothing to do with it. He helped me, carried you to safety. When I thought you were-" I couldn't say it. The memory was too horrible and cast a shadow over

the joy of having him safe, with me. “I was a mess and I couldn’t think straight. Don’t you see we both would have died without him? He pulled me together.”

“And before then, when you first met him? You knew I hunted him.”

I shrugged helplessly. “I did the only thing I could. A vampire cornered me and told me he was not going to kill me, but wanted to talk. I was terrified, and he behaved so well before I knew it I was agreeing to hide him.”

Apart from a tightening of the eyes he was calm. “There is more.” It was a simple statement of fact. “He did not feed from you the first time you met. I would have known it.”

My face pinched in preparation and my eyes welled with repressed worry. “You’ll be mad.”

His were impatient. “I need to know, to decide how to act.” His finger tapped my chin up. “Tell me.”

“He needs my help.”

He held my eyes, disapproval stamped across his features. “This relationship you have with him, it cannot last. Our kinds do not mix.”

“How did you know?”

He looked away and sighed. “It was obvious that he cared for you. Such a creature of darkness could not feel such a thing without it being returned.” His face became blank and his eyes blazed. “I will kill him if he dares to touch you ever again.” His eyes gentled. “Come, we can go now to the Grove. You wanted to go.”

“Breandan”

He remained silent but his grip on my chin tightened.

My foolishness pricked like thorns. “Have you never done anything stupid for someone you-”

He chuckled. “What? Love?” With a snort, he released my chin to brush his fingers along my collarbone. His mood swings didn’t surprise me anymore, so I smiled up at him tentatively. “You should know something. Devlin was right about you being part of the Tribe. In the eyes of fairy law, my claim on you does not have to be honored

unless you swear fealty to my brother. Because our union is not lawful our bond is weak. What you feel for the vampire is the result of this. When our bond is sealed any feeling for him will be overwhelmed by your love for me." He grimaced. "Will you swear fealty to my brother? Was he kind to you?"

My mouth dropped as I remembered the proud face so familiar yet strange to me. If Breandan's raw energy and beauty were refined, and hardened the result would be Lochlann, Breandan's older brother and leader of the rebels had returned. And what did he come back to? His brother in company with a vampire and the silly fairy he'd bonded to practicing dangerous magic, after nearly destroying his rebellion. And I had wondered what his problem with me was.

Breandan shifted and looked apologetic. "He can be over protective at times."

The air in my throat caught. "He came back. I-I have to be honest, I didn't expect him to, did you?"

"Oh yes." He covered my hand, holding it to his face and a dark smile played on his lips. "He was not happy when he learned of our connection, but do not worry, he will accept us. I will make it so. We have the amulet of wisdom and that will please him, even if he does not show it."

I laid my hand over my pendant and grimaced. Breandan thought I was going to be handing it over. He thought wrong.

A rash excitement was lighting Breandan's eyes up. "Are you ready to begin your new life? I have so much to show you."

I sucked in a deep breath, my chest puffing out. "Don't you dare think because you're all gorgeous and perfect I'll start following you around and doing everything you say because I'm mated to you. I won't hide behind you like a love struck fool every time there's a fight. I want to learn magic, how other fairies fight and how to defend what's mine. And don't think I won't question you and Lochlann's logic because, I got news for you-"

His hand tugged my chin forward. "Stop talking."

I became still as he closed the distance between us. "Breandan," I said his name as his lips silenced mine.

He kissed me, slow and gentle. Then he was grabbing at my hips and

biting my lip. When he pulled away my lids were cast to half-mast and my lips bruised.

“Oh,” I said and whimpered as he smirked, tugged on my arm.

We ran again, and I could not stop smiling. Then when I stopped I was in the Grove and I positively beamed.

It was nothing special, the same trees of the forest and the same star speckled sky. I stepped forward and nearly walked into a side of roasted pig hung high from a tree. What made me smile was the fairy-children dressed in knee length tunics, swinging from hammocks, and slumbering peacefully. Snuggled into their mother’s side. I peeked at a few and cooed at their rosy cheeks and soft crowns of hair. Many of the fairy-women were dressed in heavy fabrics, jeans, jumpers and thick plaid shirts. The popular hairstyle of choice seemed to be up in a sloppy bun. Well I’d fit right in. The men slept below on the floors under their women in coarse blankets. To the back there was a large tent. A fire crackled and popped outside it. The Grove looked like any other campsite, but the campers had pointed ears and glowed with an inner light.

The smile slid from my face as Conall stepped into my path.

“No,” I said and stomped my foot. “No, because I just got here and I am tired and dirty and grumpy. So no.”

His small smile was apologetic. “Lochlann wants to speak to you.”

“Later,” I gritted through my teeth. “I need some sleep and something to eat, if you wouldn’t mind. Is there somewhere I could wash up?

“Lochlann wants to see you,” he repeated.

I snorted and looked at Breandan for back up. My heart sunk. “We can’t go sleep, can we?” He shook his head. “We have to go see your brother right now, don’t we?” He nodded. I sighed and made a ‘move it along’ motion with my hands. “Lead the way, Conall. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can sleep.

Chapter Nine

Fingers entwined and shoulder's brushing as we walked, Breandan and I entered Lochlann's tent and stopped in the centre.

He paced the paced in front of us, eyes narrowed and chest heaving. "Finally, you are here, and I can begin judgment. Did you get lost on your way here?"

Breandan did not answer. Clearly, the question was rhetoric.

I however had something to say, "What do you mean, judgment?"

"You will not speak unless spoken to." Lochlann's voice cracked like a whip.

It took a beat for me to recover from the shock of being told pipe down so rudely. "Who to the gods do you think you're talking to? I'm not one of your rebels. You can't talk to me that way, or boss me about and expect me to obey."

He stopped pacing and looked deliberately from my face, to my fingers wrapped around Breandan's. "My younger brother is sworn to me. Your attachment to him makes you part of my court."

"Like hell it does," I fired back. "What Breandan and I do is none of your business."

Lochlann had intimidated me when I'd first met him, but not anymore. Two people had tried to kill me. I was pissed, tired, had a full bladder, an empty stomach and he was making it worse. It was hard for me to keep a semblance of calm when Breandan had only just been healed, and I had been parted from my vampire-boy. He was pushing all the wrong buttons at the wrong time.

Lochlann seethed at me silently for a moment before his face went blank. Instead of relaxing I put up all my mental guards; I was used to this behavior. Breandan did it when he planned to manipulate me.

My eyes wandered and landed on Conall who smiled encouragingly. I managed a tight grimace in return.

Lochlann held out his hand. "The amulet of wisdom, give it to me."

"No," I said.

He blinked and frowned. “I want to see it. You can have it back.”

“I said no.”

He watched me for a while then said, “You saw my sister before she was taken captive?”

“Killed,” I said slowly and carefully. “I saw Maeve as Clerics killed her.”

He pressed his eyes shut, cocked his head then shook it. “I feel her. She is alive. I would know the moment of my sibling’s death.”

Breandan nodded in agreement. “She is still with us. Hidden and bound by iron.”

That was news to me, and why hadn’t he said so before. I knew fairies had amazing powers of recovery, but could we survive a bullet to the chest? Maeve had looked pretty dead to me. I didn’t say this, of course, out of respect.

“The humans have gone too far this time. They will pay. My sister will be retuned. We will give them one chance to free her, or we shall take her back by force.”

I didn’t like where this was heading.

“Hold on. You can’t be so general in your damnation, and you can’t start throwing around ultimatums.” Breandan squeezed my hand, hard and I shot him a look. “Don’t be trying to silence me. There are good people at the Temple. Yes, Lord Cleric Tu and the Lady Cleric were wrong, but not all humans think like them.” I kept it to myself that a fair portion did.

“We did not start this.”

“You should defuse the situation, not rile it up. I’m telling you if you march up to the Wall and start shouting demands it won’t be received well. The Priests will feel threatened, and they will send the Clerics.”

“I will kill anyone who stands between me and my kin.”

“Lochlann, I think it’s great you care about your family, but hurting people in their name-”

“You cannot talk to me of family.”

He really knew how to use words to effect. “Fine. I admit from what I’ve heard my roots leave something to be desired.” I took in a breath, things were getting a little close to home, but I’d started this and I was going to finish it. “But we’re not talking about me. We’re talking about your actions that may start a war. The last time the demons and humans clashed, the entire human race was nearly wiped out. I’ve been told that many of demonkind were not happy to fight. What’ll happen to the human survivors who face demons motivated to kill. We’d be looking at the extinction of an entire species.”

“These Clerics. You would be able to show them to me?”

My lips twisted. Lochlann was not listening to me; in fact he was completely ignoring me. If the fairies took this stance it would only end in bloodshed. The thought of my fellow Disciples clashing with these beings made me sweat. “If revenge is what you’re thinking, you’re too late,” I told him. “The Lady Cleric was killed by-” I stopped and slid my gaze Breandan’s way. His only reaction to the topic was a flaring of his nostrils. “She’s dead,” I said flatly.

“The vampire,” Breandan explained through clenched teeth.

Lochlann paced in front of us, his eyes on me. There was little warmth there. “Brother,” he said in a tone of quiet command. “Your, female has shown no respect for who and what we are. How do you know she can be trusted?”

“Rae is true to me.”

“She kept the truth from you, on more than one occasion. Because of her you nearly lost your life. And this thing with the vampire-”

“Is none of your business,” Conall cut in scathingly.

Lochlann barely glanced his way. “Your family is the single greatest disappointment to our race. As the Elder you should be helping her to along her new path, not encouraging her foolishness.”

“Elder?” I asked.

“Head of the family,” Breandan told me.

Conall stared at Lochlann with thinly veiled hate. There was a niggle in my mind, two dots dancing around each other waiting to be connected. Elder, head of the family, gold eyes.

“She is mine, Lochlann. Let me leave with her, and I swear you a month of peace.”

Breandan blanched.

I spun round and glared at the newcomer. When I saw who it was I managed to splutter, “What did you just say?”

“I wasn’t speaking to you,” Devlin said and let the tent flap drop behind him. “I was addressing the one you refuse to follow.”

“I did not say I would not follow him,” I objected hotly.

I had remembered too late that not following Lochlann, meant I was in Devlin’s Tribe.

“You’re not seriously considering” I trailed off at the look on Lochlann’s face. It was blank, calculating. Cold.

Sucking a series of shallow gasps I slowly looked at Breandan’s face, terrified at what I would find there. He glared at his brother so balefully I was surprised the older fairy could withstand the weight of it.

“One month with no attacks?” Lochlann asked.

Devlin made a big show of lifting his chin, and placing his hand over his heart. “I swear it.”

Uttering the oath the air thickened with magic and hung, waiting for acceptance.

“No.”

The word was not shouted, or hollered or uttered in any way that could be conceived as emotional. It was a flat out refusal, brooked no argument. It was a command. The magic sighed and dissipated. Breandan slid me behind him and I wrapped my arms around his waist. I couldn’t stop my body trembling.

“Do not deny the reason of it,” Lochlann said.

“I said no.”

“This isn’t just about you,” Devlin said. “You would continue the death of fairy lives for the sake of one female.” He made a scoffing noise and ran his eyes all over me disdainfully. “She is beautiful, and

pure though she reeks of another. I promise you take her once and she will lose her appeal."

"That is enough," Conall barked. We all turned to him as he lithely stepped over to stand beside Breandan. "This isn't even a discussion."

"Who are you to interfere?" Devlin sneered.

"You know very well," he hissed back.

"Well then would someone mind letting me know?" I asked in a low voice. "Because I am mighty confused."

Breandan shifted and put his arm around me. "It is not the right time."

I shrugged his arm off and ignored him. I ignored everyone, but Conall. I tapped him on the shoulder and he turned, reluctantly, to look down at me from his lofty height. His eyes, deep gold, shimmered with suppressed feeling. When we had first met he had told me he knew me as a baby. Truth rung inside my head and in a rush my thought's tumbled over one another, fighting for recognition.

Conall's eyes were a unique colour I had only seen on one other person. He had touched me, several times, and I had never thought anything of it. When he had it wasn't like Breandan, whose touches felt like fire and ice. His touches felt natural and comforting, and he'd never shown aversion to touching me; even areas sacrosanct like my tail. Conall had watched over me and shown a level of understanding a stranger would not have deserved. He had the same skin, eye and hair colour, for gods sake.

"Brother," I said with certainty. "You're my brother."

He nodded once. "I had hoped when you finally visited Orchard, the place of our birth I could explain your origin, our connection. I had hoped to get to know you and for you to learn to trust me. Things have not worked out like I planned."

I was dumbfounded. I was dirty and tired and drained. Too emotional to try and explain how I felt, I simply said, "Later. We'll talk later." It was anti-climatic but he didn't seem to mind.

"Yes, that would benice." He paused. "Would you like to know the first time I ever laid eyes on you?" Eyes wide, I nodded wordlessly and he beamed a smile. He was positively delighted by my acceptance. He stood straighter and his eyes sparkled. "When you were born and I

was a young one, hours after your birth I peeked in your cradle. I tried to touch your cheek, but you fisted your tiny hand around my finger," he held his forefinger up, "and refused to let go. You puffed up your chest and held your breath, so fearsome and brave. Mother called you, her little warrior." He laughed before his eyes became sad, haunted. "I did not mean to let you go. It was not Understand when our mother took you" His face was pained, pleading. "I searched for you, for years, but the spell on you was so strong. We only found you because you chose to venture beyond the Wall and become entangled with Breandan's future."

Large, warn hands slid around my waist. I leaned back, needing the support. Turning round to look at him, Breandan saw the worry in my eyes. He kissed my nose.

"It will pass," he said softly.

I knew he meant the pain, the sharp stabbing pain of feeling the years of abandonment issues coming to the forefront.

Taking a deep breath, I straightened my back and glared at Devlin. Before, I had denied him with a few words, and I was sure it would work again. I was learning there were rules to how the fairies operated. Devlin was walking around without chains, and I guessed that was because he had been defeated and captured fairly, meaning he could not leave unless he was saved by his own people or set free. Honor and magic bound to follow the rules.

"I'm going nowhere with you," I said.

The words were backed by the rules of magic. They had weight and the tension in the room cranked down a notch. Lochlann made a noise of annoyance. I fought the urge to run over and stick my tongue out at him.

"That settles that," Conall said diplomatically.

"For now," Devlin replied.

He and Lochlann shared a long, loaded glance. We all caught the look, who wouldn't, but I could not care less. They could plot and scheme all they wanted. Devlin would never get my bonded mate to agree with his brother and I would never say the words they wanted me to.

Breandan squeezed me before letting go to stand before Lochlann. "Swear to me you will not consider this again."

Gazes locked they stood still and silent for a long time.

“You ask me to give up the chance for time to seek a peaceful solution?”

“It will not allow it.”

“You are sworn to me, little brother.”

Breandan had an intense look of concentration on his face. He was deciding something and for less than a beat, I felt apprehension. I had lied to him, kept secrets and aided his enemies. I had refused to listen to him, and caused him a whole heap of problems with his family and lord. Oh gods. Maybe he was thinking I was more trouble than worth. He had said himself our bond was not sealed because of my connection with Tomas, and the fact our union had be created, but not sealed by magic.

“Release me from my oath,” he said.

Lochlann stiffened, his eyes snapped to me and blazed with loathing. “You let her destroy your honor.” Lochlann placed a hand on Breandan’s shoulder and shook him. “She makes you weak.”

“We could break the bond,” Devlin said. “She has a blood tie to another.”

Breandan’s jaw worked. “That is irrelevant. It would not work.”

“You are so certain,” he said with a small smile. “Hearts can change, and hers is already split in two. How do you know she will choose you?”

I raised my hands and let them fall to my sides. He just couldn’t help himself. What I had done with Tomas was none of their damned business. I refused to lower myself and defend something that should not need defending. Yes, it was weird and strange, but I was getting sick and tired of being discussed and talked about as if I wasn’t even there.

I glared daggers at him.

“I belong to her,” Breandan said simply.

“And she you?”

“Now you all listen to me.” I took in a breath and set my feet apart. “I

won't lie, I do care for Tomas deeply. I don't know why or how such a thing is possible and I do not know how long it will last." I walked up to Breandan and pressed my fingers to his face. "I can't promise I'll love you forever, because I honestly don't know how I feel. You need to give me time. I don't know what will happen next, but I'll never betray you. If you trust me, I'll trust you. Deal?"

His fingers curled around mine and held them to him. Pulling me closer, he wrapped his arms around me and crushed me to him.

"Do it," he fired above my head.

"Breandan, I release you from you oath."

There was a crack and Breandan staggered. I held onto him, and fell with him as his knees gave out. Limbs tangled we hit the floor hard. Air became a physical thing and wrapped around my throat. It settled then faded. Breandan trembled in my arms, head burrowed into my shoulder.

"Everybody get out," I said. The fairies had not moved they were still, shocked.

"Lochlann," Conall said quietly. "Please."

The fairy-lord scowled at my brother then turned on his heel and left. "Devlin, I wish to speak to you about the human."

Laying my head down I didn't see them all leave, but heard and felt it when we were finally alone.

"You didn't have to do that," I said.

"He was wrong."

We were quiet for a long time, and I thought hard on the reality of what was going to happen next. Breandan was in a precarious position. He had broken away from his brother and the Tribe, making him an outcast fairy. I had denied both Lochlann and Devlin that made me an outcast too. Devlin knew I had the amulets of power and wisdom, but Breandan and Lochlann had no idea.

Gods, it was complicated.

There was something worrying me. The other guardian must have been Conall, he had the amulet of protection, but that was not the one

Devlin had. Had the Tribe really managed to steal it? Or did Breandan jump to conclusions again as it seemed he was prone to do.

“Breandan, the amulet of protection, when did it go missing?”

He snorted. “For all that has just happened, that is your main concern?”

“Can’t you just answer the question?”

He sighed, rubbed his head against my arm. “This morning. When I knew you needed me, I hid it so I wouldn’t risk losing it. It was a place I’d hidden my secret things since childhood.”

“How would a tribal fairy have found it then?”

He shrugged. “Maybe they cast a spell or followed me.”

It didn’t add up. I spoke my next words carefully, mindful of his pride that could swell into something nasty. “Don’t you think that’s not enough to base your whole theory on?”

Breandan shifted to look into my face. His eyes were sparkly and his cheeks had regained some colour. “You know something,” he said. I nodded, and pulled the two amulet pieces out from under my tee shirt. Breandan stared at them. “I should probably be surprised, but I think the impossible will be possible with you around. His forehead furrowed. “Wisdom and power.” He touched the last empty place in the centre of the amulet. “But where is the amulet of protection you took from Devlin?”

“I took the amulet of power from Devlin.” I shuddered at the memory of the power boiling my blood, and stroking a darkness lurking beneath the core of who I was.

“Then where is the amulet of protection?”

“That’s why I think you were too hasty to blame the Tribe. I don’t think Devlin has it.”

“Perhaps you are right, though I can think of no one else who would have the inclination to take it. Its power can only work for one fairy.”

We had waded into dangerous territory again. It seemed all fairies believed they had a purpose, and I was slowly coming to terms with what mine was, but I was not ready to openly talk about it.

I traced the outline of one of his tattoos. “Tell me what they mean.”

“We all have a purpose. Mine is to keep order.”

I giggled. “Really? You’ve done nothing but break the rules since you met me.”

He winced. “The tattoos signify my skills and accomplishments. Some are for protection. Others guide me and help me see the truth.” He paused thoughtfully, slid a considering look my way that held an undercurrent of something else. “You have asked me a question, now may I ask you one you will answer?”

Shifting on the floor that was quickly growing cold, I curled into a ball at his side and thought about it. For a while there was only the sound of our breathing and the warmth of him. My eyes felt all droopy, and my mind slid into a lazy sleep pattern.

“Well, that depends on the question,” I said sleepily.

“Tomas.”

My lids slammed wide open. Breandan didn’t sound angry, but mildly disgusted.

“A name is not a question, and I’ve already explained this to you as best I can. Leave it alone.”

He snorted. “He will come back and I want you to stay away from him.”

I hissed my disapproval. He ran a finger down the bridge of my nose, over my lips. I kept my face set, refusing to be distracted.

“He is vampire. It is not natural the way they are. They bring death wherever they go,” he said with as much heat as an ice cube.

I thought back to the strange urge I got when I was around Tomas. It made me shudder. I could not deny he felt unnatural to me, but it didn’t mean it was right. Breandan was quiet for a long time, and eventually I knew he was not going to speak again. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep right then and there.

I dreamed I was dying. I watched my last sunset and Breandan held me close. We raced were-cats through the forest and the sun shined from within us. The moon rose and Breandan handed me to Tomas,

who cried tears of blood and showed me dark things. He fed from me and called me his love.

It was the cold hand clamped over my mouth and pulsing dark that woke me.

“Wake,” a voice whispered in my ear.

I peeked an eye open, remaining still. I kept my breathing even and glanced at Breandan’s face. Eyes closed and brow relaxed his breath came steady and even. I blinked up at Tomas. Had my dream called him to me? He took his hand away from my mouth and pressed a finger to his lips, then looked at Breandan. I got the message loud and clear. Stay quiet. I carefully shifted away from Breandan, rolling to my hands and knees I crawled backwards.

I stood up and smiled at my vampire-boy. I was happy to see him. Tomas led me out of the tent, and I shivered in the cold. It was quiet and everyone was sleeping, as you generally do in the middle of the night. Tomas took my hand and led me away into the trees. I tugged on his hand to get him to stop when I realized he was not going to.

“What are you doing here,” I said in a low voice. “I thought you’d gone back to your nest.”

“I followed you.”

My heart rolled over in my chest. “Why? I mean, do you have something else to say?”

“Trouble comes.”

“What kind?” I asked sharply. “The kind where I get beat up or the kind where I die?”

“In the last few hours the fairies have been negotiating the release of a human-girl. The ones that follow the white haired fairy have taken a human from the Temple. They are trying to trade her for him. The one they call Lochlann, has refused and it is only a matter of time before they attack.”

“When did this happen?”

“As you, and the fairy who was supposed to be protecting you, slept. The night is fading, but we can be far away before sunrise.”

I didn't respond. It took me moments to make up my mind, but considerably longer to work up the courage to say it out loud. I couldn't go. I felt a responsibility to stay and help the human if I could.

Tomas read the look on my face. "Now is not the time to be selfless. This will vicious."

"We can tell Breandan. He can help."

"He won't go against his brother and you know it." He took my hand again. "Now we leave."

"But I-How- It doesn't make any sense. Why would the tribal fairies think stealing a human would influence Lochlann in anyway?"

Conall stepped out of the shadows, his mane of hair wild and bristling. His breathing was hard and he hummed with tension.

I thought I could smell his fear.

"Because they hoped your connection with his brother would sway his mind." His chest had a shallow gash from his breastbone to the opposite end of his ribcage.

"You're hurt," I pointed at the slash in case he missed it. "Why are you not healing?"

He rubbed at it dismissively. "My energy is diverted elsewhere. Our bodies focus on the greatest threat to our being. I am tired so my energy is saved to keep me quick and strong."

"Who did they take?" I asked, curious.

There was a wail in the far distance and an answer came a moment later.

A silky hiss that followed from Tomas slithered up my spine. "How long do we have?" he demanded. His hand slipped from mine, and I took it as a signal to stay put.

"I killed a scout moments ago. I was the messenger sent to the Tribe to decline the offer. They are to sacrifice the human under a full moon, a perfect tithe and war cry. The peace Lochlann is fighting for will be impossible. Devlin is trying to create confusion and fear and it will work." Conall looked at me. "Rae, we're going to lose," he said. "You

need to leave. Do you have your amulet?"

I placed a protective hand over it. "Whatever is coming we can face it together. I'm not going to hide. We have to go wake Breandan up."

Conall stared at me.

"What?"

"You have to escape. Your friend is lost."

The words rocked my world and not in a good way. I blinked slowly, breaking the stalemate, yet my body held its rigid pose. My clenched fists relaxed. I forgot all about amulets and crazy fairies fighting each other.

"Who have they taken from the Temple?"

"If you die here there is no hope. Devlin would want you alive but his consort, she knows about your bond to Breandan. To her you are a threat to her life mate, and she will not be merciful if she catches you. Running into the midst of powerful enemies is no place for a fledgling soldier. You are strong." Pride flashed across Conall's face. "But this you must entrust to me. I will get Lochlann and Breandan out safely."

I knew, of course. I knew who the tribal fairies had taken to try and influence Lochlann through me. Just like I had known the last pure fairy, and Priestess was my mother. Just like I had known Conall was my brother. There was only one human I would risk everything for.

"Who have they taken," I repeated.

"Skin the colour of coca and hair like the sun," he said and wrinkled his nose. "Blonde."

There was a hitch in my breathing. Alex. They had my best friend. How, I didn't know, but she had been taken because of me. At what point did I condemn her to this fate? The first time I went beyond the Wall. The first touch between Breandan and I, or was it when I refused to give Devlin what he wanted? Devlin, he must have told them who she was and where to find her. He'd seemed mighty interested in her all of a sudden. He had even touched her with fingers infused with light.

He had marked her.

“This ritual what will they do to her?”

“They will tie her down to revel in her flesh. Slit her throat and drink the blood.”

Everything became painful. The realization I was about to lose my friend made the air filling my lungs feel heavy. I tried to imagine her bound and tortured, but my mind shied from the image. My throat closed up.

“You heard the fairy,” Tomas said. “They are going to lose. We must go.”

The pressure of the day’s issues, and all the decisions I had not made weighed down on me. “Wait,” I said and tried to figure out the right action. There was nothing but panic and fear. “I can’t think straight.” I pressed my fingers onto my eye sockets to relive some pressure. “I need a minute.”

“The longer we wait the greater risk Wasp will catch you.”

Someone shouted behind us, and a flash of light in the distance lit the trees.

Conall darted away. “Take her,” he yelled over his shoulder at Tomas then was lost to my sight.

Before he could stop me, I turned and raced back the way we came. I was faster than him now I’d had a chance to sleep. My vampire-boy had two choices, leave or follow. He chose to follow. We broke into the clearing and it was chaos. Fairies wrestled each other to the ground, hissing and snarling. The shouts were everywhere.

I raced back into the tent but Breandan was gone.

The women and children walked through the camp terrified, but unharmed. They were surrounded by a handful of fairy-men who cut down any tribal fairy that got too close.

Which way did I go? I tried to feel through the bond but only got a vague impression that Breandan was close. My panic kept throwing my concentration and I couldn’t pin down a direction.

“Calm it down girl,” I told myself. “Now is not the time to fall apart.”

I breathed in and out several times to steady my thought. He was

close, so close and in front of me? My eyes popped open and I searched through the dark. I spotted him in the middle of the fray back to back with Lochlann, fighting Devlin and Wasp.

She had come for her life-mate.

Conall skidded to a stop in front of me with a face of thunder. “Will you never listen,” he hissed and threw me at Tomas. “I told you to take her.

“We have to help them,” I shouted. “Breand-!”

Conall clamped a hand over my mouth. He shoved me toward Tomas. “Make yourself useful and get her out-”

A knife to his throat had him stopping mid flow. Wasp smiled and jerked her head.

“Come this way. Easy now,” she said sharply when Conall reached for the sword pommel on his hip. “A little nick with this blade and your legacy ends. It would be a shame Conall.” Her eyes twitched to me. “So much fuss over Sorcha’s daughter and you seem less than nothing to me. You remind me of her, the last Priestess. She was less than nothing too.” Her eyes settled on Tomas. “Though even she wouldn’t lower herself to the base level you’re scraping. Come now, our lord waits.”

When I didn’t move she dug the blade deeper into Conall’s neck and drew a thin line of blood. I glared at her and started to walk, Tomas close behind me.

Lochlann stood beside Devlin. Breandan was held at knife-point by two fairies that looked vaguely familiar. It was the grey beard and copper Mohawk from the day before. The wind whipped my hair into my face as my eyes locked with my fairy-boys.

His body jolted and his hands flew to his chest. Pain, sharp and hot at the back of my neck. I touched the spot and felt something cold, thin and knobby. A twig? My eyes drifted down. Breandan yanked a stubby twig out of his chest, pointed and tipped with something that gleamed wetly in the low light. He reached for me as he keeled over face first. My own legs weakened and crumpled.

I could hear Tomas going mad nearby. I was frightened for him. They would kill him, and I would never see him again.

Lying on the cold floor I watched as Breandan's eyes flickered closed. I could feel the drug like relaxation of whatever they had shot me with flowing through my body. Willing my own open was not enough.

My lids slid closed and I slept.

*

The world rocked. Breandan was carrying me. Uh, why was he carrying me? Memories rushed back in a panicked jumble and my eyes flickered open. Devlin grinned down at me impishly. I screamed. I tore at his face and back, but he kept moving, steady and sure. I kicked my legs so hard he jerked to a stop and set me down. I turned to sprint away, but he grabbed my arm and rooted his feet.

"Let go," I demanded and wriggled in his grasp. "What have you done with him?"

"With who? Your brother, your life-mate or your vampire?"

I was stumped. I honestly didn't know which one to say. "All three," I said and continued to try and break his hold on me.

"Breandan and the vampire are alive. They're being taken to Orchard as we speak. Your brother escaped a moment after you became unconscious, the vampire made a pest of himself and he slipped away in the commotion." Hearing this I stopped struggling, relieved everyone was alive. Devlin relaxed his hold on me some. "It would be cruel to kill them before they got to see our ceremony. The offering is the most beautiful human I have ever seen."

"Don't you dare," I shouted and pummeled him on the chest. Tears of frustration sprang in my eyes. "Don't you hurt her, she's innocent."

"Of course she is, and that is why she will make a good sacrifice." He brushed strands of hair, wet with tears, from my face and smiled. "I see you wish to save her and I have an idea. Give me your amulet and I'll-"

His head snapped round.

My voice was loud and tremulous. "I'll never give you-"

Devlin clamped a hand over my mouth and commanded with his eyes that I shut up. He cocked his head, listening. His eyes narrowed and he dropped into a low crouch, taking me with him. The gods be

dammed, what now?

Letting me go he pointed ahead and to the left then held up six fingers. Then pointed at me and held up one finger. I stared at him blankly and he scowled, repeated the motions. I nodded, slowly. He was telling me up ahead there was one fairy, a female since he pointed at me and not himself. And six others. Uh, other what? I was not used to his sign language and it was taking me a while. He meant six humans. This close to the Wall the only humans that would wander outside were Oh gods. My mouth went dry, but I nodded again, firmer this time and followed as he slinked forward.

There was no time to argue, or get fussy about our allegiances. We were both in trouble if the Clerics saw us. I broke into a cold sweat, remembering what I had seen the last time I had crawled through the undergrowth in these woods.

Devlin stopped, caught my shoulder and pointed again.

As he did Clerics pushed through a thicket of branches and stomped into view. They moved in a tight and square formation. All six had their hoods pulled up and covering their faces to the nose. Hand clasped about their waists, their funneled sleeves concealed their hands, and the white-eye sigils on their breast pockets seemed to shimmer against the crimson colour of the blazers.

The air left my lungs as I caught sight of the demon stumbling behind the marching column, a fairy with a black sack over her head, and iron chains about her neck, hands and ankles. Slashes of blood stood out on her green skin, and her body - glistening with sweat - was a navy colour along the knees and torso, probably deep muscle bruises.

Devlin hissed, a low and primal sound. He glanced at me and I saw murder in his eye. I knew then these Clerics were dead, and no words I said would convince him to show mercy. Devlin was a fairy purist. He would never let any of our kind be treated this way.

I pointed at myself then at the fairy, a simple communication. He scanned the trees and nodded; satisfied I could get the job done without getting in his way. He slinked off to the side and disappeared from my sight behind a tree. I waited alone, tense, and terrified of the quickening of my heart from a rising excitement. The column was directly opposite me now. I sunk lower, scared even in the dark and they would see me.

There was a sharp crack, and the sound of a snapping branch to the

west. They all spun, guns and knives appearing in their hands as they did. The column halted and was still. Another noise, this time a tree shaking to the north and the column spun again, another snap back to the west then another to the south. Devlin was distracting them, but never did he draw their gaze my way. There was a flash of white and a scream that choked off mid flow. The column was now five. The Clerics swelled out into a defensive formation, not knowing nothing could save them now.

Sensing my queue, I crawled around to the back where the fairy was standing. Her knees were bent and she was alert, knowing her time to escape had come.

The clerics were shouting now, fighting. Though the fairy-lord would be able to handle himself, I spared a look for Devlin to check he was doing okay. The vision of necks snapping, a knife in the eye and sight of a Cleric going limp as the bones of his body shattered when it connected with a tree trunk, was not something I wanted to see or get a look at in more detail.

I reached the fairy-girl, and put my hands on the shackles at her ankles. The immediate burn was unexpected and I yelped. Iron. At my yell, she shrieked and kicked, hitting me in the side and toppling herself over. She thrashed around and I scrambled over to clamp my hands on her arms.

“Stop fighting me, I’m not going to hurt you.”

She became still under my hands.

“Rae?” Her voice was a whimper and I remembered the light chime of it instantly. I dragged the hood off her head and released a fiery cascade of hair. Her scarlet eyes were wide and wet. “It’s you,” she sobbed and started to cry. “I’m saved, you saved me.”

I hushed her; anxious the Clerics would hear us. “Calm, Maeve, it’s okay now. I’m going to get these binds off you.”

I looked over her chains. A familiar nausea rose in my throat at the odor and look of the iron. Her skin was backend, blistering where it touched her.

“They were moving me somewhere else because there were demons in the compound. One of us has killed one of them, and the humans are furious. They were going to take me away so you couldn’t save me. I think there’s another secret place they hide the demons they catch.”

She was babbling, and her eyes darted around wildly. “They asked me questions. Who I was, how many fairies I lived with and where I lived. I couldn’t get away from them. They kept me dosed with iron, all the time. I’m weak.”

To placate her I nodded sympathetically and made commiserating noises. I fumbled over the chains, but couldn’t break them. I tried covering my hands with mud then using leaves as make shift covers, but they tore the moment I exerted any strength and the mud did nothing. There was a tap at my shoulder. Devlin held out a blood soaked hand to me. I recoiled then realized there was a small key between his slick fingertips. I snatched it from him in my haste to get Maeve free. As the chains fell away, she clambered on top of me and hugged me tightly.

Devlin started to bury the chains. Shame he didn’t have the same inclination about the human bodies he’d dismembered. I glared at him with disgust.

“You found me,” Maeve cried and buried her small head in the crook of my shoulder.

I patted her awkwardly. She didn’t smell too great. Something golden and hard knocked my hand as I stroked her hair, and I lifted a few braids curiously. On the end of one dangled a small coin sized disc. It had a single rune etched onto its surface.

“It means protection,” she said her eyes misted with guilt. “I took it because I was afraid to ask Breandan for it. I’ve known where that silly burl he hides his secrets in was, since I was old enough to crawl. I was so mad at him for treating me like a child, but I was more afraid of facing a vampire alone, so I stole it.” Her gaze bored into mine, pleading for understanding. “Take it. It didn’t work for me because it was always meant for you.”

Then her eyes crashed closed, and she promptly fell into a deep sleep.

I sat there, her limbs entwined with mine, unsure of what to do. I didn’t push her away. She needed me, and since Breandan was not there, I needed to provide her with some comfort. Holding her soothed away the guilt of seeing her hurt by the people I had once looked up to.

Devlin brushed clumps of soil from his hands and watched us, eyes clouded, distant. His white hair shimmered brightly, and his green eyes made the vibrant colors of the forest seem washed out. It was

scary someone so beautiful could wreak such carnage. He didn't seem at all put out.

"You saved her," I said, struggling to understand him. "You saved your enemies sister."

Devlin came back to himself and smirked at me pityingly. "I saved a member of my Tribe. Don't you see, Rae? The rebels are still part of my Tribe and they will be until the day I no longer rule, which I promise you will be many years to come. They may not agree with me or encourage Lochlann's tantrum and defy me for a while, but so be it." He shrugged like it really didn't bother him, but I knew otherwise. "In the end I will win because leading the Tribe is my birthright. As is mating with a female fairy of my choice."

I clutched Maeve tighter to my chest, a wary look coming into me eye. Devlin laughed, waved his hand.

"A female fairy of mating age. Maeve is pretty but too young. And I want my mate to be from one of the older bloodlines." His eyes rested on my wings and tail then skipped over my face.

"That's why you're so set on having me? Because you think it's your right to?" I shook my head. "I don't understand you, Devlin. I don't feel for you that way and I know for a fact you don't like me."

"I am a practical being and so are you." He laughed heartily. "Our ancestor's legacy flows strongly through your veins, and you could help bring us back together. Mating with you would be the right thing to do, but I won't." He smiled softly. "There is one who holds my heart firmly in her vicious clasp." He looked down at his hands and seemed surprised to see the blood there. The softness bled from his expression. "Breandan overstepped his place. Even if you and I did not mate it would be Lochlann who would court you next. He has turned his back on tradition thousands of years old."

"He saw me first," I said, finally understanding what that statement meant. If Breandan had managed to ignore me we never would have met the way we did, and maybe we never would have bonded. I saw now our connection was largely attributed to the improbable success of our meeting and was intrinsically linked to the awakening of the demon within me.

Concerned I would wake her, I gently lay Maeve down on the mossy floor. I unhooked the amulet from her braid and tucked it into my pocket. I felt a small thrill at knowing I know had all three. I had the

key that would bring Devlin and his evil hoard down. All I had to do was escape him, and get the grimoire. How I was to do that was beyond me. Conall would be close by, but he would be focusing on freeing Lochlann. The little I knew of my brother told me he was a stickler for tradition and the right way of doing things. More importantly, Devlin had my boys and I wanted them back. I was not done with them yet, we had unfinished business.

I stood and looked Devlin in the eye, crossed my hands over my chest.

“Help me, Rae. Breandan will understand. He’ll be upset but eventually he will accept. If you join with me, take your rightful place in my Tribe we can put an end to this feud.”

I stared at him and almost stuttered when I said, “No.”

His hands clamped down on my shoulders and he shook me roughly. “Don’t be foolish, you have a chance to save many of our kind.” He quirked an eyebrow and was amused. “I’ll even let you keep the amulet of power you stole from me. You didn’t think your casting broke through my shield all by itself did you?”

My lips pressed into a thin line. “I admit I should have known it was not my natural ability that kicked your ass, but what do you mean you’ll let me keep it? I took and you can’t give something that’s not yours anymore.” I looked at his hand on my shoulder, fought the urge to set it on fire to get him off me. “How did you get the amulet of power anyway? It makes sense Conall and I are guardians, the last Priestess was our mother.”

“Sorcha, your mother gave it to me. Oh, don’t look so shocked. Her husband was my uncle, and after his death I was the next male in line to rule.”

I digested this, painfully slow. “My father was royal?”

Devlin tipped his head back and laughed so uproariously I began to feel hot.

“Your farther was High Lord until his wife sheathed a dagger in his heart. After she broke it of course, lying with a human.” He snorted. “I always liked Sorcha and she me, but she was a foolish woman.”

“Was?” I whispered. No one had confirmed my mother was dead, but then I knew in the core of me, she had not survived the horror of her own making.

He stared at me, pitiful once more. “She killed my uncle and the High lord, Rae. You expected her to live?”

Chapter Ten

It was cold. Noisy. Feeling returned in increments. First I could wiggle my fingers, toes then my legs. I moaned at the thumping at my temple and tried to bring my hands down to my face. My eyes groggily slid half-open when I realized I could not move them to obey. I looked down my body, now clad in a flimsy black sheath, and saw my legs drawn apart and held down by rough rope. I tried to remember, but the fog was still heavy over me and it was dark. I could smell trees, dirt, and fresh air heavy with smoke and something else, metallic and weird. I recognized this smell was wrong, bad, and yet so familiar. I tried to pull my legs, my arms, but I could do nothing but flail. Gasping, I drew deep and gritted my teeth. I opened my eyes fully and took in my surroundings.

All around me were leaves, thick purple leaves with sharp silver thorns.

Slowly, my mind struggled to piece it together. I shivered, and shook my head as it hit me in flashes. Breandan had been dragged to the centre of the camp and cruelly beaten. Lochlann had been held back, and Maeve had been thrust into his arms, sobbing.

Tomas had been brought forward, snarling and fighting as they bound him.

Wasp had enjoyed slapping the chains around my neck a little too much. I'd been hoisted up to hang from a thick tree bough, and was bound so tightly I'd lost feeling in my limbs. The smell of iron made me retch and heave. Then the pretty fairy had smiled wickedly before she punched me, and I'd lost consciousness.

I was awake now, and wishing she'd hit me harder.

Directly opposite me, my vampire-boy was suffering. Bound with silver, skin red raw where it rubbed against his wrists, he looked furious.

"Next time you listen to me," he said.

I gave him a wobbly smile. "You think there'll be a next time?" A chain slid against my wrist and I winced.

If such a thing was possible, his eyes darkened as he looked over my

shoulder. I craned my neck around to see Breandan on his knees, bound in wreathes of iron chains. Maeve had woken and was in front of him, trying to hug him and crying and apologizing. Lochlann stood protectively near them, statue still and head held high. I guessed he could do nothing since he had been defeated. He had no choice but to let Devlin continue with this madness, unless he was rescued.

I decided then that fairy rules were stupid and melodramatic.

I whispered a wish that Conall would be nearby, and that he would save us before anything bad happened.

Devlin shouted something, and his voice drew my eyes to where he stood. Beautiful fairies were gathered around me chanting. The orange glow of a roaring, smoky fire flickered across exposed skins. Creatures with ears pointed and teeth fanged, swayed to a throbbing pulse I could feel vibrating my skeleton. They were like me, my kind. The side of my head throbbed, and I clung to consciousness. Oh gods this was bad. Feet clawed and scaled pounded the ground in a tribal rhythm. The beating of chest, feathered and armored blended into a melodic clamor. Fingers sunk into the earth to scoop bracken from the floor, and heave it into the air with flourish, letting it sprinkle over them like polluted rain. Clothes thin, transparent as the smoke that snaked around them, billowed and streamed in the wind as they gyrated and preened around my bound body. Every beady eye, fluttery lash and arced eyebrow was directed at me, yet the mouths and bodies whined a tune I was too dizzy to recognize. They shrieked and hissed. Leaping and dancing they groped and kissed, smiled and bit. Blood was drawn with screeches of rancor and their lusty whimpers whipped up a hungered frenzy.

I blinked, and focused hard on the centre of the commotion. They danced around something wide, flat and gray, raised from the floor. An alter. The human lying on the stone slab moaned and writhed.

“Alex,” I whispered.

She moaned again, and twitched. She was coming too. I wished she would stay under so that she could be spared the horror.

“I call you fairies here to partake in this delight. The night is our master.” Devlin’s voice, raspy and thick cried out. His words were carried away on the wind into the darkness. He stood at the foot of the dais, handsome and magnetic. His hair flowed like golden corn. Eyes wide and clear as the sky in summer. Face luminous, pale and

stunningly angelic. He held a simple curved blade in hands, too perfect to be human. Beneath his ebony robe he was naked, and the moonlight reflected off his pearlescent skin. A terrifyingly evil aura pulsed from within him.

“Our master,” murmured the beautiful voices.

“She is pure. We offer her to the night with glee in our hearts, and blood in our mouths.”

Devlin took a deep drink from a silver chalice then spilled the rest of the contents over Alex’s body. The metallic scent from before reached my nose. A few splashes dripped into Alex’s mouth and terror gripped her so hard she screamed, arcing her back. The skin under her bindings tore.

“We offer this human child. We give thanks to the night that blesses us with sex, blood and death.”

“This is not happening,” I said loudly.

“Rae?” Alex choked and squinted, trying to make me out in the low light. Her eyes went wide and she started to thrash around. “Help me, oh gods, what’s happening?”

Devlin slapped her across the face. Alex kept shouting for me and pulled harder on the rope that bound her. I had nothing to help her. I didn’t even have any words to soothe her. I tried to reach to the Source; I could feel it all around me, calling to me. All I had to do was touch it. I panted, and grunted, and tried to extend my influence past my own body, but the iron was overwhelming.

A cloaked figure stood in the m�l�e, utterly silent and composed. A deep cowl was drawn over his head, and I could see nothing but the gleam of calm and cold eyes peering at me. I got the greatest sense of danger from him, so I looked away and struggled harder. My wrists burned and chafed, but I kept writhing.

“My brothers, sisters. The Tribe protects you and pleases you with fresh meat.” Panting, I continued to struggle. I just needed one arm free, just one leg. “A body to drink revel and break.” Devlin’s voice clotted with lust.

A new fear shot through me hot and hard.

He wouldn’t dare.

His mouth trawled over Alex, and she convulsed in disgust as his clawed fingers dragged leisurely across her skin. Wasp was beside him and laughed throatily. My eyes stung, and the salt in my tears tasted bitter as it slipped into my mouth.

“The night is our master, our lover our warrior. The night is our master.” Over and over and over they chanted, rising and falling in tempo.

Hair red as blood, a female threw back her head and shrieked at the moon. A bare-chested male with yellow jewels for eyes rocked on his heels and bared his teeth. Snarly razors filled my vision. He was smiling at me, and those eyes, those glowing eyes snuck into my mind and stoked the fires of my hysteria. I stared back in mute horror as he jumped onto the altar by Alex’s head, and let out an undulating cry.

I looked up into the sky, through the dark shadow of trees and succumbed to fear. I stopped struggling.

“She can’t die like this.”

Wasp’s hand slid down Alex’s chest and cupped her breast, squeezed.

“Please,” I begged, clamping my eyes shut as Alex’s screams increased as her dress was pushed up her torso, and the wailing from the fairies got louder.

“Look at me Rae.” Tomas’ voice was urgent. I tore my eyes away from Alex to him. “Don’t watch,” he whispered.

“Do something,” I sobbed.

He looked stricken and tried to free himself. Like me was held by chains that drained his strength and mental abilities, and there was nothing he could do. The clear dark that followed him around was a frazzled gray.

“Rae,” Alex said quietly, so calm and collected it reached me through the chaos.

“Don’t look away, I want to see your face.”

My tears streamed as I turned to her. “You’re going to die.”

“I love you.” She smiled and the blue runes on her check crinkled. “You my best friend. I don’t know what you are or who you are, but

that don't change the way I feel, y'know?"

I nodded frantically and braced myself. "I love you too." It was the first time and last I would ever say those words. They were hers and hers alone.

Another hand, smaller with razors for nails trailed down her stomach, across her hip. Alex cried out in pain as the cries of anticipation shattered the night. The noise and clamor reached peak as Wasp fisted her hand in Alex's hair, drawing her head back, almost in tenderness. Devlin lifted the blade high above his head, and the wicked sharp edge flickered with light. Then he

Another scream erupted from me so loud a blood vessel burst in my eye. My scream cut off, no more air in my lungs to carry the sound.

The figure cloaked in black threw back his hood.

Conall.

My heart crashed in my chest as screams, sounds of death and violence surround me. I was too terrified to open my eyes. All I could see was Devlin's dagger sinking into Alex's throat and the gush of blood. The bonds at my hands went slack. My feet were free and I kicked for all I was worth. Screaming. Too far gone to fight properly, I lashed out like a wild animal. Firm, but gentle hands lifted me up and held me close. I kept my eyes pressed shut in defense against whatever torture I was to be subjected to.

"Be still Rae, I will not harm you," a calm voice commanded.

The voice was singsong, not raspy and seductive. It hinted of magic and light. Still, I pushed, and shoved, and bit with my teeth. I yelled and screamed.

"She can take no more, Lochlann," Maeve's high chine sounded sad. "Leave her."

"No," I said hoarsely. "I won't be fooled. You're all evil. Demon monsters!" I thrashed about, hoping to drag an eye out and to my grave with me.

"Watch. Your brother avenges your friend as you bawl like a baby."

My yelling stopped and my eyes popped open.

Conall had become a phantom figure, massacring the bewildered fairies prancing in the inner circle. A blur, he ripped and tore the beasts to pieces like crepe paper. There was nothing but a whisper of sound as death claimed those who'd held us captive. He disposed of any lingering survivors with a snap of the spine, or blade through flesh. Headless bodies tottered and fell as hot guts spilled onto the cold ground. Then it was done and he was still.

Clad in snugly fitted pants, and soft boots he was tall and sinewy. His dark hair was ponytailed, resting loosely across board shoulders. His skin glowed like a beacon and his ears had the distinctive point of fairy. With competent ease, he wielded his sword in one hand, and saluted to Lochlann with the other. Leather hilted the shiny steel of his sword was drenched in what looked like red paint. Chest splattered in blood and gore, clutched in his other hand was the dismembered head of a fairy. Savagely lifting it high, he laughed boomingly and blood dribbled from the ragged hole where the neck used to join to the body. He tossed it indifferently and it landed with a squelch to roll and gather the pine leaves on the forest floor.

Orchard, the fairy wyld was littered with mutilated fairy bodies and I felt nothing but bone deep satisfaction.

I scrambled over to the dais, and sank to my knees over Alex's body. Her eyes were wide and starring, mouth slightly parted. Rocking back and forth, I wound my fingers into my hair and wailed. She was dead. Gone. I could never laugh or joke with my friend again. She had lost her life for my mistakes, my foolishness. I couldn't bear it, and nor would I have to.

I placed both my hands on her eyes and called magic to me. It came reluctantly, already forming into something dark and unnatural. As I stood in the way of natural order, my nature rumbled with discontent. I was meant to bring balance, not perversion. I didn't care, so I ignored my instincts.

I did not have time to think of the ramifications of what I was doing. I couldn't let her go, and I hoped in time she would forgive me, and understand why I did what I did. I muttered the name of one who might take pity on her.

Her body twitched beneath my hands as if I had zapped her, and I said it again, louder this time.

"What is she doing?" someone asked sharply behind me.

“Loa!”

Her eyelids fluttered.

If this could work, if I could call on the voodoo deity and call back someone from the grave, it would be Alex. She was the daughter of powerful mambo, a voodoo Sorceress who ran wild in demon territory, and battled against witchcraft before the Clerics hunted her down. But Alex had been spared. The Clerics had taken her to the Priests for judgment as a child and they had declared her human, believing the spark had missed her. I could sense something within her. A glimmer of the magic her mother could touch and manipulate. I had never taken her roots seriously the few times she had spoken of it, and all that time I’d known her, in her own way she had been asking me to believe in her.

There. I had it under control. Her life force was trying to depart, but I tethered it to her body.

“Forgive me,” I whispered in her ear. All I had to do was lock her soul within her body and she would wake.

A heavy pressure at the base of my neck shocked me still.

Mercifully, it went black.

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Before I opened my eyes, I smelt him. His mineral and damp earth smell. I opened my eyes and concluded it had all gone to hell. Tomas was burning. Whorls of smoke rose from his skin, and his head drooped forward. The silver hung him from a tree and bit into his skin cruelly.

It felt like a sack of bricks weighted down each of my eyelids, and my bones slid around inside me.

“Let him down,” I croaked.

Lochlann’s glacial gaze fell on me, and his face was hard. “He has taken a life,” he said stonily. “By fairy law he dies.”

I shook my head. It felt spongy and full of empty space. “What life? Uh, the Cleric was going to kill me. He saved me.”

“He has killed a fairy. He faces the sun.”

“You’re wrong,” I said, fuming he was bold enough to try and take Tomas’ life with such an outrageous claim.

He couldn’t have killed anyone; he hadn’t had the time to.

“We found her body, Rae,” Conall said and knelt down in front of me. Maeve was a step behind him, her eyes wide and sorrowful. “Her throat was mauled and her blood drained.”

“There are shifters around. The fairy wylds border a Pride, don’t they? And the blood, if she was mauled she would have bled out.”

“His trail led from her body to the place in the Wall Breandan took you. We guess it is here you met him?”

Denial at Conall’s explanation died on my lips when Tomas’ own words came to me as a distant echo. “I have already eaten, a skinny girl, bitter.” Was I really to believe a starving vampire would come across a lone fairy and not bite her?

It didn’t matter. The thought stoked the fires of my anger, and I rolled onto my hands and knees. It didn’t matter because he was mine. I gained my feet and ignored the fact the floor rippled.

As I spoke, I staggered forward. “I am sorry for your loss, but you need to let him go.”

“Bind her,” Lochlann ordered.

Chains appeared in Maeve’s hands, which I now saw were wrapped in cloth, and she looped one around my neck and snaked the other around my torso. I dropped like a stone. Was I really so predictable they had prepared the one person who I would never see as a threat with chains? I stared up at her, horrified.

She looked away in shame and turned her back on me. “I’m sworn to him, Rae. I have no choice.”

I looked to the east and saw the tip of the sun kiss the sky. We were still shaded by the trees. There was time.

Conall was still on his knees, trying to comfort me, but he preempted my plea, “I too am oath sworn to Lochlann, and I do not think this creature should live.”

I looked him in the eye. “You say you’re my brother.”

“Always.”

“Then help me,” I said. “Just take him down so he can hide.”

He looked away. “I cannot.”

My eyes spun round, but even as I thought his name, I realized the folly of my hope. The fairy-boy I was bonded to, and supposed to mate for life with would save the vampire-boy who I had a blood tie to and who shared half of my heart? Still, I looked to him. Hoping he would find some compassion for a fellow demon and save him. Breandan was no longer bound to Lochlann’s will and could act as he chose. He avoided my gaze and turned his back to me. No word or other gesture could be so bold a statement.

The first rays of the morning warmed my arm and splayed across my face. I locked gazes with Tomas, who breathed hard, eyes wide.

“I am not afraid,” he told me. “But I regret-” He groaned and gasped in pain.

I battled with the chains, tears of frustration and pain sliding down my cheeks at the realization I could not break them on my own.

“Be still, Rae,” Conall urged. “Can you not see the evil you have tied yourself to? This is for the best, little sister.”

I couldn’t do it. I could not watch another person die for me. If I had listened to him we never would have been captured, and I never would have watched Devlin steal the life away from the most beautiful and vibrant person I’d known. I closed my eyes against the coming horror. Gods, give me strength. A prickle of power radiated outwards from my chest. The amulets! I had forgotten all about them. Maeve had made a mistake. The iron around my neck and torso drained my strength, but this time I could move my arms and legs.

Sunlight touched Tomas face and he started to burn. His fangs ran out and his eyes glazed over black. His skin looked awful in the light, translucent. As the daybreak grew it blackened and peeled away.

It was a struggle, but I stood, keeping my eyes on Tomas. He needed me, now was not the time to be weak. I slipped my hand into my pocket pulled the amulet of protection out.

Lochlann lunged for me and I sent him flying with a pulse of energy. He landed on his feet, but seemed winded. He hesitated before trying

again. Good, because I didn't think I had much control left in me. The next people to get in my way were in for a rough ride.

"Stop her," he commanded.

Maeve came next and I dodged her easily enough, she wasn't even trying. Conall tried to grab me, but the look I sent him had him over-shooting his aim by a mile. Lochlann went for me again, but Breandan wheeled round to plant himself between his brother and me.

"Move," Lochlann said. "You risked everything by defying me, and I allowed it because you are my brother. I will not let you unleash another danger upon our kind."

"This has nothing to do with you anymore. You may not touch her."

"Young fool. She chooses another and you stand by and let her."

Breandan shrugged and the defeated slump of his shoulders was heart wrenching to see. I didn't have time to reassure him, or thank him.

I pulled the amulets of wisdom and power that hung from the leather cord around my neck, and slipped the amulet of protection into the last place. The air stilled and then crackled with a zing of electricity you could reach out and touch. My hair was swept up in a cyclone of wind, and I breathed in the scent of soil and sunlight that reminded me of Breandan. He was close and he was on my side. His strength and dedication to me helped me see who I really was. I was Rae. The last pure fairy who could wield the power of the key and who was destined to be a Priestess. It was my purpose to lead these demons from the darkness.

I was not afraid. I was strong and I had magic.

Drawing deeply on the Source, filling every nook of myself with power and energy I called to the forest then flung myself at Tomas. I crashed into him and the tree bough cracked, almost like it gave way for me. It seemed like we fell forever, entwined, gazes locked. The tree groaned and swept down, its branches twisting and curling into a shroud around us. We landed hard, me straddling him, and the ground rumbled and shook in a tumult. In an explosion of mud tree roots shot up from beneath the earth to surround us. I glimpsed the bright and beautiful dawn as the tree roots and boughs smashed together, encasing us in a living tomb. Then it was dark.

Tomas trembled beneath my body. He felt hot as I ran my hands over

his face, and I winced. It was cracked and rough. He smelt foul like, well, burnt flesh and I gagged. Easing off him, I steadied myself and placed my wrist over his mouth.

“Tomas,” I said, breathless. “You have to feed before you die for the day.”

He didn’t move. I rubbed my wrist over his mouth and then instinct took over. His teeth sunk into me and I lay there as he drank himself better. It was not long before he moaned and then his head hit the floor with a solid thunk. I ran my hands over his face. He felt cooler and his face smoother.

“Was that enough? Will you wake up again?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I believe I will.”

I touched his cheek and the skin slowly healing blackened under my touch. I jerked away. “I’m hurting you. My skin, it’s glowing, I-I think it’s sunlight.”

At any other time or with any other vampire, sunlight seeping through my pores would be crazily fortuitous, but my voice was horrified. Eyes closed, his fingers searched for mine. Again his skin burned the moment he touched me, and I tried to pull away, not understanding why I was causing him more pain. There was no off switch, and though my light was dimming, I didn’t want to risk hurting him.

“Don’t pull away from me. I will heal.”

My skin looked dark next to his. He looked deader than usual and it scared me. The glow of my skin had cranked it down a notch and he held on tighter.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, and sounded like if he had the energy to make fun of me, he would. “Rae, promise me something?”

“That depends. The last time I agreed to something before knowing what it was, it caused me a lot of trouble.”

He coughed and laughed. It was a wet, horrible sound and I grimaced.

“Go ahead then, tell me.”

His eyes sparkled like shiny rocks before the lights in them went out,

and they slid closed. He died for the day.

“Tell me,” I said loudly, panicked.

It was in vain. He was beyond me now and would not be within my reach until the sunset. I watched as my blood healed his body, faster than if it had been human blood. For once I felt relief that I was fairy, being this way had helped him survive.

I was tired and sad, but the silence and stillness was not welcome. I was worried about what would happen when I stepped from the living shroud. I ran my palm over the earthen roof above me, and blinked when dirt fell in my eyes. The walls and floor were soft and hard. A mixture of leaves, mud and bark. There was a root dug into my back and I shifted closer to my slumbering vampire-boy. He was cold again and though it made me shiver, I scooted closer and rested my head on his chest.

The best thing, I figured, would be to wait for sunset. Tomas would hopefully be better and he could have more of my blood if he needed.

Breandan was going to be mad.

The thought alone was enough for me to want to be entombed there for the rest of my days. In the end, he had helped me save Tomas, but I knew he was not happy. I could feel he was not happy. He was also close by, so close if I was to stand he would probably be sitting less than a few paces away. Guarding me. I was proud that he had chosen to do the right thing, even though he knew it might mean losing my love to another. It made me love him more. Gods, how selfish was I? I loved Breandan but was too afraid to tell him. He was already crazy possessive and I was not okay with that. I was bonded to him by magic and that was commitment enough as far as I was concerned.

A further problem was that Tomas was a part of my being now. As much as I needed air to breath, I knew I would need him around. Just being next to him was dangerous. He was a starving vampire who was disconnected from his humanity, and unscrupulous in his belief he had to kill to survive. Yet I found him endearing and worth saving.

Conall would be pissed too, not that he had a right. I was going to have words with that brother of mine and none of them were going to be nice. He had failed me. I could understand why he could not save Alex; his main concern was recuing Lochlann and Breandan so they could fight.

Tears I thought I had already cried out ran down my face as I thought of my friend. She had been so brave, in the end. She had not looked at me with hate and disgust, but told me she loved me. Gods, as much as I hated it, I could accept it because she did. I had tried to save her, to reanimate her body using the voodoo practices of her bloodline, but it hadn't worked. I'd been stopped. There was nothing else to do but take her body back to Temple and back to Ro. He would hate me too, for he was smart and would figure it out. The easy thing would be to bury her out here so no one knew of her death, but I couldn't do that. Her life deserved to be celebrated. All I could do was try to explain and hope Ro could forgive me, as she did.

I felt a stirring of anger. Lochlann, he was a problem. I thought he was going to be the good guy. He would continue to try and justify his actions by saying Tomas had killed a fairy. I would not let him take his life. Tomas had to make amends for the life he had taken - I was not sure how I would get him to do it, but I would - and I did not give a damn what power Lochlann thought he had to condemn my vampire-boy to death.

Breandan's reluctance to go to the Grove made sense now, as did the fairies reaction to news that we were bonded. The fairy Priestess were usually the life-mates of the fairy-lords. Lochlann was trying to overthrow Devlin, who definitely needed overthrowing, and that would make him High Lord of all fairykind. The Priestess kept the spiritual balance and the High Lord kept physical order. Breandan had not wanted to see me, because he knew we would be stealing his brother's future mate. Yet, he could not help but seek me out, knowing that the white witch had seen we were to be together.

Anger became rage as Devlin, skewering Alex, flashed across my memory again. He would die, and I sent a fervent wish it would be by my hand. I was going to become so powerful just hearing my name would stop his heart. I would find him and destroy him, laughing as I did so.

Guilt I would never be able to shake, crept over me and memories of Alex bombarded my vision. I sobbed. Again, I tormented myself with the depth of my failure. It hadn't worked. I had tried to save her, and it had failed miserably.

I lay down beside my vampire-boy, the one I had been able to save, and cried for the one I had lost. Lying in the dark with death itself had me wallowing and sinking deeper into a place I did not need to be. I needed the sunlight. I needed Breandan.

Tomas was going nowhere, and this shroud was nice and tight. I called on the Source and asked the forest to bury him deeper. The ground rumbled and more roots emerged from the cool earthen floor to wrap around his lifeless body and cocoon him. Happy he would be safe from the sun; I dug a small opening for myself and crawled out. A hand gripped my forearm tightly and pulled. I emerged from the shroud and blinked rapidly at the bright sunshine.

I looked around tentatively, on guard for any attack, but the camp was empty. The fire was now a smoldering pile of ash, and the only evidence of the nightmare at dawn was the fresh trails in the undergrowth. My gaze settled on the stone slab, still awash with blood. I trembled.

“Where is she?”

Breandan rubbed my arms, soothing me. “Maeve is tending to her body. We are going to burn her, a queenly funeral.”

“No. I want to take her back to Temple.”

The soothing caress stopped. “You know how the humans will react.” His voice was calm, as if he knew that was what I had wanted all along.

“It’s the right thing to do. I won’t burn her like a dirty secret.”

“Alright.”

We were quiet for a while. He seemed serene and I could sense no anger bubbling under the surface.

“You don’t hate me?” I blurted, unable to contain myself.

“Never. Though, I wish you were simpler.”

I snorted and rubbed some mud out of my hair. I flexed and extended my wings and sighed in relief.

“Where did everybody go?”

“Back to the Grove. Lochlann cannot stay here until he is High Lord. This wyld is for the ruling family.”

“Where has Devlin is gone? Will we be able to track him and his followers?”

Yes. But he is still High Lord. There are rules, Rae. Devlin must be tried against the laws of our people and the lordship removed from him by popular vote. Only then can a new High Lord be chosen."

I sighed, hearing between the lines. "For Lochlann to rule, Devlin must live."

"Oh yes. That is the way it must be. At least, until the power has been transferred."

"I will kill him," I said bluntly.

"And I'm going to stop you."

Again, we were at opposite ends of the spectrum. The truth was, I didn't care what he wanted, or what Lochlann wanted. I wanted Alex to be avenged. Nothing was going to get in my way.

"He murdered Alex, and for what? She was an innocent."

"I know you are grieving." Breandan stroked my face temple to jaw. "I will help you to heal."

I went into his arms then and let him hold me. The hurt in me was an ocean I thought would never run dry. All I could do was protect what I had, and avenge what I had lost. There I stood, in the arms of my fairy-boy, standing over the resting place of my vampire-boy, and worried about what I was to do.

Conall stepped from the trees, cradling a girl shaped bundle wrapped head to toe in leaves and flowers.

The body twitched.

Letting Breandan go, I set my two feet apart and spread my wings until the golden tips were in my line of sight. They shone a brilliant gold, and felt glorious in the sunlight.

I readied myself for the day to come.

*

Author Bio

I, Penelope Fletcher, love to read and want to write something worth remembering. Simple as that.

Curious about A DEMON DAY, sequel to THE DEMON GIRL? Want to rave about Rae Wilder's antics, or have a chat about writing in general, come on over to www.fictionfierce.blogspot.com and say "hai". Or tweet at me www.twitter.com/Miss_Fletcher.

A DEMON DAY will be out SUMMER 2011.

Read on for a sample of the first chapter.

Chapter One

I ran. There was the forest, the gasp of my breath, and the pound of my mate's heartbeat as he raced beside me. Nothing more. The forest, teeming with life hushed reverently as we blazed past, in awe of us, in fear.

Devlin was less than a day ahead, and his trail was erratic. Appearing suddenly then becoming deceptively faint, or weaving in odd directions. It was clear he was trying to throw us of course, using magics and distractions to slow us down so he could escape. Each time I was sure he had changed course or had gone another way, Conall had disagreed and pointed out the way. At times we had to stop so he could read the trails, listen to the wind and press his ear to the earth.

I hummed with passion. Hate. I wanted Devlin's head on a pike. I wanted to dance manically around his corpse, and give in to the dark whispers in the corners of my heart.

We begun the hunt as the dew from the dawn soaked into the understory. I had left my vampire-boy, Tomas, slumbering in the earthen tomb I had made to keep him safe. He was dead, and would not rise until the sunset. I was pleased, because it meant I could focus on the task at hand. Catching Devlin, getting the grimoire and ripping his heart out before Breandan, my life-mate, could stop me.

Irritated and grumpy I waited, hand on hip for Conall to tell us which direction to take. I plucked a few leaves from the mess of inky-black that was my hair, and felt Breandan come up behind me. His hands gently rested on my shoulders then slid down my bared back to pass over my wings. They twitched and fluttered at his touch. He continued, lazily wandering to my waist then lower, gripping my hips.

"Focus," I said, and thumped him lightly on the back of his thigh with my tail.

"I'm trying to relax you. You're too wound up and ready to break."

"I want this over with. I want him dead."

He sighed and muttered, "This is not going to end well."

I twisted round to look him in the face, unsure of what he meant. He looked at Conall and his lips pressed into a thin line. Breandan was

skilled at schooling his expression, and I had to watch him closely to see if he was mad, pissed or upset. I was going for mad.

“What?” I asked, because it became apparent he’d realized something before I had. I stepped out of his arms and he let me. “What are you both not saying?”

I looked to Conall, the mighty warrior who was strong enough to massacre a small army of his kind. He glowed, brighter than any other I had seen, except when Breandan and I were suffering the effects of our bond. Conall was beautiful, a face of hard angles and smooth planes. His eyes were gold, a family trait it seemed, since mine were the same, only lighter. His muscled chest heaved with a sigh.

“The trail has gone cold.”

I stared at him.

“You’re lying.” Even as I said the words I flushed, but kept my stare defiant. Conall could not lie. Fairies could not lie, except for me. They were bound to speak nothing but the truth by magic. A fairies word once given was law.

Conall ignored the comment, flicked his hand through the air as if brushing his hurt aside. “It is beyond me. Devlin has worked a spell. There are three different trails, each are cold and each carry his and Wasp’s scent. Less than an hour ago we were half a day away and gaining. Now, it seems we are days behind and losing more time. It is a trick, a spell and I cannot see past it.”

“Then we follow each trail. One each.”

“No,” Breandan said.

“Apart from the fact it would be most unwise to leave you alone, Rae,” Conall said patiently, “what happens when one of us does find them? Or maybe we will find more false trails that we cannot navigate alone.”

“Then we follow each one,” I said through my teeth. “We pick the most likely, follow for a while, and if we’re wrong we’ll backtrack and start again until we get it right.”

“And what of the time we lose whilst doing this? What if we come across more false trails? We could spend days going in the wrong direction.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was ready to spend my lifetime hunting Devlin. Then I saw the stupidity in such words and my shoulders slumped. I burrowed the toe of my boot into the needle leaf strewn around me. Tears threatened to spill from my eyes. My voice was thick when I said, “There must be another way. We can’t just give up. Not just for my rev-sake. Lochlann needs the grimoire before he can start setting things right, doesn’t he.”

Even if Conall would not give into a selfish endeavourer, such was the nature of revenge; he was the most loyal warrior I knew. He would do anything to secure Lochlann the fairy-lordship because he believed it was the right thing to do.

I looked up and found Breandan glaring at my brother, who sent him a short look of apology.

“There is something else we may consider. It is not without its dangers.”

“It is not a good idea,” Breandan said.

My tears were gone. Straightening, I cocked my head and tried to look attentive and brave, not desperate to crack some skulls. “Tell me and I’ll do it.”

“The shifters.”

My nipped intake of breath was loud in the sudden silence. “Yes,” I hissed, new possibilities opening up like a carnivorous black hole before me. “A pack of were-cats could read each trail and save us time. Which is the closest?”

“Byron’s pack is close and of the Alfa’s he is the most civilized.”

“You both forget I have already said no.”

Breandan sent me a pointed look that told me he was serious. I returned it with some extra ‘I’m doing this so back the hell off’. I won, of course. He would not dare deny me this.

“Lead the way, big bro.”

Conall grimaced. “My title would do if you wish to call me something other than my birth name.”

“Huh? What title?”

“As the oldest surviving member of our family, you may call me Elder.”

“Na, big bro is fine.”

Breandan laughed. It seemed the sun shone brighter, and his smile made me blink.

Conall muttered something about fools in love and took off. I followed close behind, and Breandan reached out the same moment as I did, to join hands.

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